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THE WESTERING SUN

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ETC.

THE WESTERING SUN

A Novel

by

GEORGE BLAKE

COLLINS &
THE BOOK SOCIETY

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CHAPTER I

THE GHOSTS OF JULIUS OLIPHANT

ON A GUSTY AFTERNOON of March, 1918, a girl child, hardly more than an infant in arms, watched her father's coffin carried out of the house on the shoulders of the undertakers' men, thrust forcefully into a waiting hearse and, in that vehicle, pulled by four mettlesome, black Belgian stallions, taken away out of her sight down the winding gravelled drive behind the familiar thickets of laurel and rhododendron.

The little girl was in that moment completely free from any sense of personal grief. She brought to the spectacle the absolute and even delighted wonder of an infant in any raree-show. Her young brain, struggling to master the intricacies of living, wondered why they should be taking Papa away in a drawer and in an ambulant hothouse. For her the oak coffin with the brass handles was simply one of the drawers of the dining-room sideboard. The glass-sided hearse was of the same family as the hothouses in which, on the slopes behind the house, Micky Reid, the gardener, grew grapes and tomatoes and what-not with a wry and occasionally angry passion. Wreaths of daffodils and narcissi, of forced tulips and early violets and sickly arum lilies, so covered the coffin in the hearse and filled a four-wheeled cab behind it as to give the infant the impression that this was some sort of garden display.

Then she was moved to ecstasy as, when the hearse passed out of her sight behind the mass of an ancient bay and wheeled eastwards, a military band, loud if invisible, started playing. The music was sombre, but the plangency of brass and the thudding of drums were pleasing in the infant's ear. Her cup of delight would have been full could she have seen the company of khaki-clad soldiers who, their arms picturesquely reversed, moved into place in the long funeral procession behind the music. She would have marvelled to see the great length of the train that followed her father's corpse to the grave —first the hearse, then the band, then the company of soldiers in the green kilt of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, then some thirty large coaches drawn each by a pair of shiny black horses, and finally a concourse of mourners afoot, marching four abreast in their blacks.

Even from an upper window of the villa oddly named Agincourt, however, this spectacle was not to be seen in all its majesty. The thickets of evergreens before the house intervened, and the little girl's view was in any event severely limited by the fact that she was watching her father's departure for the cemetery between two down-turned slats

of a Venetian blind. Even that position was insecure for she was being held up in the arms of an older sister who, her own eyes busy between another pair of slats and her body far from robust, swayed in response to the varying interest of the scene being played out on the gravel below. The child saw the hearse disappear, then two or three coaches in its wake, when suddenly the spectacle vanished much as if the light had gone out in a magic lantern.

She had been dropped to her feet. The door had opened behind them and a voice had spoken severely.

"Rose Anne! What sort of behaviour is this?"

"The kid wanted to see," replied the girl who had held up the child, adding rather defiantly: "So did I."

"Such an extraordinary way to carry on!"

The tone was of simulated rather than of real anger. It was that of one who keeps up appearances without quite believing in them. The tone confessed a mild sort of confusion of distress, and it seemed exactly to express the personality as well as the mood of the speaker. She was a woman about thirty years of age with the fine, rather prim and faintly worried air of a handsome woman about to be confirmed in spinsterhood.

The three female creatures remained there for some moments in a state of embarrassed suspension. They were all frozen within a sense of guilt, the child for having been taken in a simple act of indiscipline, the other two for being parties to a breach of the custom of reverence in bereavement. The exquisite overtone of the small symphony was provided by the clear absence of profound grief in any of the performers. The theme of their concern was social and not of the heart.

The tension was broken by the appearance in the doorway of that upstairs bedroom of a comfortable woman of middle-age. She was of medium stature but of such pronounced orotundities that the apron of an upper, and privileged, servant appeared to gleam where it was stretched tight over a noble bosom and a developing paunch. She wore no cap; her grey hair was combed into a bun within a net at the back of her head. Steel-rimmed spectacles on a broad nose confessed an air of good-humoured, tolerant, managerial wisdom on a broad peasant's face and so relieved it of ugliness.

"O, Bridget!" exclaimed the oldest girl. "Here they are!"

"Aye, and so this is where they are, the besoms!" retorted Bridget cheerfully.

She stooped and picked up the child with infinitely more address of strength and skill than the girl called Rose Anne had mustered. The infant appeared to fuse happily into the ample bosom, to become part and parcel of a monumental but inexorably efficient mass of protective femininity.

"So here you are, ye rascals!" repeated Bridget crisply. "Is this where they were a' this while, Bell?"

"So it seems," said the oldest sister unhappily.

"Well, I never!"

Bridget spoke in the flat-vowelled tongue of West Scotland, but with a crispness of authority.

"And this is where ye were, Chris?" she intimately addressed the infant in her arms. "Runnin' away from auld Bridget wi' that baggage, Rose Anne? Come, hen, and we'll lay ye doon for a whilie in yer ain beddy-baw. Then we'll have a rare tea to ourselves in the schoolroom."

Her shrewd eyes behind the glasses surveyed the grouping of younger people in the little room. She saw what no other person in the world could have understood so completely and sympathetically. She saw the three girl children of the same father by three different mothers grouped in uneasy relationship in the hour of formal mourning. She saw three children whom she had separately nursed from the feeblest infancy into girlhood and knew with precision the issues that at once separated them as individuals and bound them as a group. More than half her lifetime devoted to the offspring of the man but recently carried away to the cemetery gave Bridget a position of quasi-maternal authority above even that of the woman she had addressed familiarly as Bell.

"Rose Anne better get on unpicking that old dance frock of hers. It'll dye black and do fine for the house," Bridget resumed her discourse on household matters. "You'll see to the boys' tea when they come back, Bell?"

"Yes," agreed Bell a little listlessly. "There's no use moping about the place now."

"What's done canna be undone. . . . Come on, hen! Up on ma shou'ders, picky-back. Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross. Upsadaisy!"

Hoisting the happy child on to her shoulders, the thin little arms tight round her neck, Bridget passed from the room.

"I'll get that Peggy to pull up the blinds." she said over her shoulder, making it clear, as it were, that this was by no means the first funeral she had handled from the domestic end.

Meanwhile, the funeral procession went on its slow way through the tree-lined suburban streets to the cemetery. As the head of it approached the massive ornamental gates which Victorian piety had set up for the proper reception of the dead the military band, silent for a space after an orgy of Chopin in B flat minor, opened up again with Handel in C major, the great drum-beats reverberating from the walls of the high tenement buildings.

In later years men of the older generation, reminiscing fondly, would say that Juley Oliphant's was the last military funeral in Garvel. Purists of a still older generation would maintain that it was not a military funeral proper in the grand tradition, only a half-and-half affair of a company of Reservists and a scratch depôt band : not at all to be compared with the great parades of three Services, each with its own music, such as marked the passing of old Jock Carmichael or that boy of Sir Neil's who died on his return from the Boer War away back in 1902. These grudging old Scotsmen would add that it was a damned farce to give a military funeral to Juley Oliphant, who had never been more than a captain in the old Volunteers, even if he had nearly got to South Africa and, in the stress of a European war, had reappeared as Officer Commanding the local battalion of Volunteers. No war and no troops stationed in the town and with dam' all else to do but boss around, Juley would have gone up to the cemetery like the rest of 'em, in silence.

Nevertheless, military formality did surround this man in death. A Chaplain to the Forces, fourth class, read the service (in the Episcopal order) over a coffin that bore on the lid a silver plate inscribed :

JULIUS WALTER IVIE OLIPHANT
B. 1866.
D. 1918.

Among the mourners were a baronet and the son of a peer. The reserve battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders provided a piper to play a reedy lament before the open grave. As the cortege re-formed to leave Juley Oliphant to his God and the worms the brass band led off down the main avenue of the cemetery with " The Girl I Left Behind Me."

In one of the great, black funeral coaches thereupon a plump, rosy little man in his late 'fifties started to laugh. It was not noisy laughter, but it was hearty. The tubby frame shook ; the pink face grew pinker, and jets of suppressed mirth hissed from between the babyish lips.

" My God ! " exploded wee Darcy Fleming the lawyer, unable to discipline himself any longer. " ' The Girl I Left Behind Me ! ' And poor Juley was the damnedest old humbug in the town ! "

The laughter was not, as they say, infectious. None of his companions in the coach suspected wee Darcy Fleming of malice, even if it was well known that he would not have the handling of old Juley's affairs. They were simply decent Scots men of business, with a proper respect for the proprieties, and their companion's mirth made them feel uneasy, even unhappy.

"O, not so bad as all that!" demurred Bill Ritchie the sugar broker. "He worked for some good causes and did a lot for the town."

"Never did a dam' stroke of real work in all his life," retorted wee Darcy Fleming, still bubbling with delight in the situation. "All he was good for was a fat cheque for any charity that would keep his name sweet. A form of fire insurance, I suppose."

"Still," suggested Peter Aitken of the Tanworks, a tall, dreary and cadaverous man who disapproved wee Darcy's levity, "he kept his position. A big man in the town. Somebody people looked up to. There was his grandfather, and there was his connection with Lord Alderford and all those big L. and W.S. interests. You couldn't say, Mr. Fleming, that it wasn't something—well, pretty big."

"Could I not?" retorted the chubby lawyer, reacting blithely against the solemn. "The poor chap was never much more than a purser on the river steamers, and he wasn't even fit for that, by all accounts."

Bill Ritchie the sugar broker intervened with a chuckle.

"Come on, Darcy! That'll do you. We know you don't mean half you say. Old Juley was what he was. And he wasn't a half-bad chap. Who's going to judge?"

A dry voice spoke from a hitherto silent corner of the coach.

"May I suggest one thing, gentlemen? Although I am a comparative stranger to the town . . ."

This was Mr. Prophet, the Rector of the Grammar School. He was a small, uncomfortable-looking person with gold-rimmed glasses that lay awry above a snub nose. He twisted the fingers of two hands in an anxiety of apprehension lest he fail to make his meaning clear. The others let him understand that he was free to speak his mind.

"It is so interesting," said the pedagogue primly, "that everybody speaks of the late Mr. Oliphant with reservations. He wasn't 'half-bad,' 'not a bad sort of chap,' as if he had quite definitely failed to be successful in the common esteem."

"You're about right there!" cackled wee Darcy Fleming.

"My own impression of the man," Mr. Prophet resumed, "was gathered at meetings of the school governors; he was our chairman. Sometimes, I confess, he seemed to me to be as Mr. Fleming represents him, not to put too fine a point upon it, an old humbug. At the same time, I always felt as Mr. Aitken feels: that he kept his position and was somehow a leader in the town. So perhaps Mr. Ritchie has the rights of it: that he was what he was. Precisely that. A man thoroughly of his period and circumstances and environment. A man who had inherited considerable wealth, whether he could have earned it for himself or not. In short, a typical product of our industrial system;

and who knows what special factors of heredity and upbringing complicated the theorem? The studies of Freud in Vienna . . ."

"Freud," cried wee Darcy Fleming with delight, "should have a look at Juley's sons if he wants to study morbid psychology! Lord! It's the clearest case you could find of all the brains of an old family passing to the womenfolk. The Boys are bigger asses than old Juley was, and that's saying a lot."

At this point the coach, passing through Regent Square was halted by the violent rapping of the handle of Peter Aitken's umbrella on the window.

"I'm getting out here," he said brusquely and left the company.

The circumstances suggested flight from and disapproval of Mr. Prophet's thoughtful analysis of a human problem, and it was indeed something of the sort. Mr. Aitken felt decidedly uncomfortable with all this clever talk, this probing into a dead man's private affairs and character, this calling-into-question of the industrial system, the backbone of Britain's prosperity. This was, in fact, confoundedly like Socialism or even this new-fangled Bolshevism.

The coach, driving on, left Peter Aitken of the Tanworks alone and slightly undecided on the pavement and, with its occupants, passed out of sight behind the Museum and so out of this narrative.

In another of the funeral coaches, however, taking a shorter but parallel route back towards the West End, four men were also discussing the late Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, though in terms infinitely less detached than those used by Mr. Prophet. Three of them were sons of the dead man, while the fourth was a relation who, though he had encountered Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant only once in his lifetime, naturally did not feel either free or competent to talk of the deceased with the candour brought to the subject by wee Darcy Fleming and Mr. Prophet.

The mood in that particular coach was, as it were, elegiac. Three mature men mourned a father in the presence of a distant but important relative.

"Well, I must say," observed the oldest of the dead man's sons, "that it all went off very nicely."

"Very good show," said the stranger. "I mean, very impressive. Nice cemetery you have."

"Garvel Cemetery," explained the second oldest of the brothers, "is admitted to be one of the finest in Britain. In position and lay-out, I mean. Of course," he added uneasily, "you see it at its best on an occasion like this. I mean, a really big affair. I think everybody who matters in the district was there to-day."

"Quite. I noticed that," said the relative politely.

He spoke in the manner and with the accent that all Scotsmen

secretly envy and often ape: the easy, casual but inveterately self-assured tongue of the ruling class in the English tradition. There was also in this man's manner, however, an elusive hint of indifference, just as in that of the three brothers there was an equally obvious eagerness to please the stranger and remain, at the same time, his equal in courtesy and address.

"Pity you can't stay a day or two," said the oldest of the Oliphants. "We'd like to show you round. It's a nice bit of country."

"My dear fellow, I wish I could," asserted the stranger earnestly, "but I really must get that night train from Glasgow. There's a whole set of engagements waiting for me in Town to-morrow. You know what it is?"

The demeanour of the Oliphant brothers, the Boys, indicated that they knew what it was. Their nods and frowns agreed with the implication that it was a difficult life for men of affairs and position. Themselves men of positions at least in their given provincial world, they were most eager to allow that this distant cousin, the Hon. Charles Oliphant, must be the most hapless victim of high responsibility. At the same time, a privileged observer of the scene would have detected in the Boys a certain disappointment in their guest, in his casual manner, and in his apparently fixed determination, having duly discharged a duty of consanguinity, not to stay in Garvel a moment longer than he needed to.

"If this damned war would only stop," said the second oldest of the brothers in his vehement way, "we'd have you up in summer and give you a run round the West Coast in *Iolanthe*—our steam yacht, you know. But——"

"*Iolanthe's* up at Scapa Flow now, on Admiralty service," the third of the Oliphants, a mild and apologetic man, took the opportunity of declaring himself for the first time. "It's a most extraordinary thing, but our young brother—Tristram—Lieutenant, R.N.V.R., you know—was actually posted to her. Navigator. No influence or anything like that. Just posted in the ordinary way to Papa's yacht!"

"Quite a coincidence," his older brother backed him up loyally, though he had been holding up this piece of intelligence for his own purpose. "The dam' thing was he fell ill and couldn't take the job."

"Lovely craft, *Iolanthe*," said the oldest of the Oliphants.

"Really! I mean," said the stranger, "I did hear all about that. It was thrilling to hear that Uncle Julius had offered the yacht to the Admiralty. Good show! And Tristram's her navigating officer. Now, I hadn't heard about that. What a strange coincidence!"

"He's not with her actually," the oldest brother resumed command of the domestic narrative. "In fact, poor Tristram's in hospital. Seems

to be suffering from strain. Probably shell-shock. You know what it is?"

"Too bad!" their guest agreed. "Very bad luck, indeed!"

Suddenly the coach wheeled between two sandstone pillars into the drive leading up to the villa called Agincourt.

"And here we are!" the senior of the Oliphants announced. "Are you sure you can't stay the night, Charles? It would be a pleasure."

"Absolutely, old boy!" was the stranger's verdict. "I simply must get that night train or be in a most horrible pickle. Ever so sorry, I assure you, but there it is."

The room in which these men were to assemble after the funeral had been carefully prepared for them. Bell Oliphant, already sufficiently burdened by her concern for the child called Chris and the care of Rose Anne, a highly-strung girl at a difficult age, had been in and out of the chamber ever since the funeral procession had disappeared down the drive. She had been well warned by her brothers of the heavy importance of the visit of their kinsman, the Honourable Charles Oliphant, cousin of the fourth Baron Alderford. That nobleman would no doubt have been present in person to give the funeral almost historic significance had he not (though this could hardly be known in Garvel) at that very moment, as a major of cavalry in Gough's Fifth Army, been engaged in extricating himself and the dog-weary remnants of his command as rapidly as possible from the advancing Germans.

Bell did not anticipate the arrival of the Honourable Charles with either curiosity or enthusiasm. She knew that the Boys would capture and hold him in this almost sacred room of theirs, and she looked round it, and sniffed its masculine odours, with distaste as well as with the concern of the responsible housewife. She even thought with a vague bitterness how exactly it reflected the almost massive complacency of her father and his four sons by her own mother.

That much-married man, Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, had made some sort of addition to the already massive sandstone fabric of Agincourt in celebration of both his second and third experiments in matrimony. Each, Bell often remarked to herself, was actually a gesture in praise of male exclusiveness, a ministering to the assumption of male supremacy.

The first, marking his belated union with Kate Hercus, the big-boned, horse-admiring mother of Rose Anne, produced a range of stable accommodation at the south-eastern corner of Agincourt: a fine bit of expensive mason-work that included, besides accommodation for carriage and pair and a tiny upper flat for the coachman, a gun-room (as Papa had loved to call it) and a workshop in which, in one

of his recurrent enthusiasms, he proposed to pursue the various arts of woodworking. The second, following his third and equally brief experience of marriage to the mother of little Chris, was this single-storeyed extension westwards ; so that the original, ten-roomed oblong of Agincourt took on the shape of a rather eccentric, long-legged L.

It was as if he had built in this West Room a club or separate pavilion for the males of his clan. The chamber was fully forty feet long and half as broad. A full-sized billiard-table was a trifle in one corner near the door, and a pianola was almost negligible in another. The arched fireplace of brick and the club fender before it were of baronial proportions. The easy chairs and one great settee were upholstered in perdurable brown hide, each chair had its attendant glass-topped table, and the very ash-trays in turned brass looked as if each was fit to anchor a sizeable yacht securely. The walls were adorned with coloured fox-hunting scenes by Cecil Aldin and a series of comic golfing prints from one of the pictorial weeklies. Of natural oak, with smoothly-sliding doors, was the great sideboard in which the Oliphants kept their ample and varied supplies of drink, cigars, cigarettes, pipe tobacco, pipe-cleaners, matches, bottled cherries and olives, salted potato crisps and Bath Olivers, not to mention some pots of Gentleman's Relish and jars of a very special Bismarck herring, to which the oldest of the Boys was much addicted.

This great room, despite many windows and a bumper fire of logs, had the faintly stale, exhausted smell of a place much smoked in, and Bell's delicately-chiselled nostrils, sniffing the air distastefully, clearly discerned in it an element of vinosity. And as her senses revolted against its physical aspects, so did her brain turn to its significance within the sufficiently complicated life of the household. It took nearly the whole working-time of one maidservant to minister to the wants of the menfolk, to answer the frequent ringing of their bell, quite apart from the strain on recurrent cooks of their highly individualised tastes in food and fads of dietary ; so that the service of their convenience had become, by unquestioned custom, a large part of her own life and responsibility.

She could hear the voice of her oldest brother, Ambrose, complaining in its curiously flat and muffled tones :

" Bell, I would speak sharply to that girl, Hannah. She completely forgot to iron the billiard table this morning."

And those much more vehement tones of her second brother, Jerome, which were a symptom of his weakness rather than of any strength :

" That girl wants a keelhauling. I'll swear she's made away with at least fifty of my cigarettes since Monday. . . . Well, sack her and get another."

And what if she, Bell Oliphant, absurdly christened Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, were to retort as vehemently as for years she had wished to do and walk out like the young wife in the Ibsen play? Then, assuredly, the elaborate edifice of male privilege would collapse like a pack of cards. But there remained the cases of her step-sisters, Rose Anne and the hapless Chris.

Her fingernails clicking faintly on the rim of one of the big brass ash-trays, this slender woman of thirty, fair-haired and delicate of feature, though with the bloom of virginality wiped off her face by the years and their ardours, contemplated the nature of her dilemma.

Shortly the crushing of gravel under the wheels of a funeral coach stirred her out of the sombre coma of thought. Now to see that Cook and Hannah between them had the tea things properly prepared; now to advance, the destined hostess, to greet the Honourable Charles Oliphant with a politely drooping hand and a nice adjustment of her manner as between cordiality and respect. The inner part of her mind was busy with the hope that he would not be spending the night. That would be little enough within the resources of the household but, like a woman fatigued physically, her instinct was to be apart and to face the issue of the conflict of loyalties in which she was involved. She sped along the narrow service passage to the main kitchen premises that the nice social sense of Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, backed by architectural ingenuity, had had built parallel to what might be called the gentlemen's entrance to the large clubroom.

If Bell had cared to glance through one of the northward-looking windows, with their superb view of a broad estuary and of rugged mountains beyond, she might have noticed a small paddle-steamer thread its way across the Firth among the merchant vessels and warships anchored out there in profusion, a smear of smoke from the funnel obscuring her after parts and even the white wake her paddles left behind. She was the *Ruby* of the Western Railway fleet of pleasure craft, apparalled now for war in Admiralty grey, and on the bridge beside her commander, Captain Neil Macglashan, stood a stocky, middle-aged man, who, though attired in a heavy black overcoat and a bowler hat of lofty and antique design, had himself the unmistakable cut of jib that marks the professional seaman.

In midstream, passing between two battle-cruisers of olympian solidity, Captain Macglashan reached up his hand to a cord, pulled it twice with violence, and so produced from the steam-whistle on the funnel above his head a couple of noisy blasts.

"They're chust a lot of pests, those naval pinnaces," he remarked equably to his companion in the bowler hat. The softness of voice and tolerance of outlook bespoke the West Highlander. "Darting here, there and everywhere like beetles on a pond."

He relaxed again and leaned on the rail beside his friend. His fingers combed through his red beard, and his shrewd eyes obliquely considered the other man's face.

"So you went to the great funeral, after all," he observed with elaborate detachment. "Why did ye no' wear your uniform and yon fine medal of yours? That would have shamed the Oliphants."

"I had no wish to shame them," the other replied. "A small courtesy costs little enough."

"It was not much courtesy yon one gave you in his lifetime, or me."

"He's dead; we're alive. He had the wealth and the power, but we are not starving; and we are happier than he ever was."

Captain Neil Macglashan advised the steersman to starboard his helm a trifle for the sweep round the bay to the awkwardly-angled pier at Ardhallow.

"Maybe, Calum, maybe," he resumed his discourse. "*Ma tha sinn gann de storas, cha'n eil sinn gann d'en oige*, as the song says, though it's hardly spring chickens we are nowadays. Chust the same, I doubt he'll have a hard time of it with Peter at the Golden Gates, yon one."

He stepped forward and pulled the engine-telegraph back to half-speed.

"It's queer enough, when you think of it," said Captain Macglashan, "that this is where it all started, and that wasn't yesterday."

CHAPTER II

SUMMER EVENING

I

UNDERNEATH the pier at Ardhallow a youth of singularly good looks sat on one of the broad cross-beams and swung his feet luxuriously in the coolness of sea water. The July afternoon was blazing hot outside this supermarine cage of timber baulks, but though the boy could smell the tar blistering on the landing-stage above his head and on the treads of the boat-ladder beside him, he was taking an exquisitely sensuous and æsthetic pleasure in his situation.

The state of the tide was so exactly right that, as he sat on the cross-beam and let his legs dangle free, the water came to just below his knees. The tide falling, he reflected lazily, it would still be high enough to cool his feet for nearly an hour to come. Even its colour in the shadow of the pier was blissfully cool—a clear lime-green over white sand. The unsuspicious, shapely forms of saithe and other inshore fish cruised elegantly only a foot or two beneath his toes, dark against the sand, their grace offset only by their ugly, sucking mouths. He remembered how, as a youngster and from this same cross-beam, he had fished for hours on end with the terrible patience of a child, his eyes glued on the hook and the fragment of blanched mussel-flesh hanging from it. Now he knew that these well-fed, almost metropolitan creatures would appear merely to smell at the bait, discern the trap and turn idly away. Moreover, he was himself no longer a kid but a young man of nearly seventeen and the heir to a fortune.

Indeed, the drift of the lad's thoughts as he idled there was quite alarmingly adult, and his nerves were the conduits of a welter of emotions and sensations relating to love and the bodies of women and all manner of tender intimacies. Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant was no more a criminal in that respect than any other normal adolescent, and he very gravely believed himself to be in love of the most romantic and faithful order. The girl lived in the big house up the lochside road beyond his grandmother's much more modest villa. In the yearning but desperately faint hope that he would see her, even meet her on her morning way to the village shop at the pierhead, he had in fact sacrificed the best of this glorious summer day and was now at a loose end and in a low state of spirits, idly dangling his legs under a pier in mid-afternoon, when he might have been, should have been,

away with his friend Calum Bell as the privileged guest of Captain Angus MacLachlan, master of the river steamer *Caliph*, to the Kyles and back.

His warm hopes had, however, been defeated by the regard of Victorian parents for the moral security of their girl children. Having sat through a long forenoon hour among the rushes and wild irises on the knoll outside the piermaster's box, Julius had indeed seen Miss Flora Gillanders in the charming flesh, but the party had come down from Inverquey House in the carriage-and-pair, and with Flora were her mother and Bet Mackenzie, once her nursemaid. She must have seen him : that was certain. He knew that this passionate girl must be looking for him, if only out of curiosity. But had she really dared to glance his way under those long, dark eyelashes that could lie with such delirious charm over the little brown-skinned breasts of flesh that were so piquantly moulded over her high cheek-bones ?

The boy, lazily swinging his feet through the heavy, clear water, was thus deeply involved in the age-old dilemma of the innocent lover. Had she really looked for him ? Did she truly care as he so passionately cared ? The doubt was a delicious agony, and he had to feed his hungry emotions by questioning near-probabilities. Then he took to complicating his agonies by reflecting on the social aspects of his devotion. It was in his nature to hate that carriage-and-pair as the symbol of aloofness and superiority. It irked him that on their way to and from the mansion-house of Inverquey his princess and her parents must pass the modest seaside villa in which he lived with his grandmother. Angrily, even petulantly, he turned over in his mind ways and means of confronting the great John Gillanders, ironfounder in Glasgow, and letting him know that he, Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, was through his American mother heir to a fortune.

From this agony of social awareness, commoner in moonstruck youth than the year-weary may remember, the boy was stirred at length by the drum of paddle-beats, communicated to him by vibrations in the water rather than by sounds in his ear. For a moment or two, clinging to his sensual fancies, he contemplated the whiteness of his feet in the greenness of the sea and the quaint break by refraction in the line of his legs. Then the gathering commotion of a steamer's approach restored to him his natural boyishness and, slipping a pair of sandshoes over his wet feet, he scampered up the ladder on to the sticky planking of the pier under the relentless sun.

The little ship approached at speed, high plumes of broken water feathering from her bows. Anybody unfamiliar with the handiness of those paddle-steamers of the Firth might have thought she must crash into the pier or go racing past it. But at a distance nicely judged by the shrewd Highlander on the bridge—it was not much more than sixty

yards—the paddles ceased to drum and took to dipping their floats almost daintily in the water ; the charge of a vessel under power subsided into an easy glide ; and shortly, with some backing of paddles and a churning of sea water into the semblance of freshly-poured ginger beer, the vessel lay comfortably into Ardhallow Pier, and a throwing of lines and a knacky hitching of dripping hawsers round bollards completed a small miracle of specialised and regional efficiency.

Young Julius considered the *Caliph* with the eyes of a longshore expert. Like every boy who lived along the interminable coastline of that great estuary, he knew to a hair her qualities as a specimen of the native art of marine engineering—age, builders, length, beam, moulded depth, tonnage, horse-power, engine and boiler types, speed, and even (through close acquaintanceship with her master) the little oddities of behaviour that she, like every ship ever built, to no matter how strict a pattern, would exhibit in given circumstances.

Now, however, he was more concerned with a purely human regret that he had not after all sailed in her that morning as he had been bidden to do. For the sake of love he had let slip a high privilege. On this fine day in the middle of the up-river tradesmen's Fair Holiday week the *Caliph* seethed with humanity and all the abundant interest of the common life. The best part of a thousand people were on board, so overloading her that, as she approached any pier or passed another vessel of interest, she heeled over and the churned water poured from between the slats of a dangerously-tilted paddle-box. Looking down on her from the quay, Julius saw, heard and even smelt the largely drunken confusion of the industrial mob on holiday.

Between the bulwarks of the long foredeck labouring men and their doxies danced riotously to the jigging of a melodeonist from whose jacket pocket protruded a bottle of whisky. Other bottles were circulating and being swigged at from the neck, convention requiring only that the last drinker should wipe the rim with the back of his or her sleeve before passing it on. On the raised quarter-deck abaft the paddle-boxes the music was provided by a three-piece band of fiddle, cornet and accordion, and to this another mob, though on a fractionally higher economic and social level than those who rioted on the foredeck, danced sets of quadrilles. From both decks halflin youths and wild girls shouted at Julius in cat-calls obscene or nearly so. From the steamer there rose to his nostrils a confused stink of sweating bodies, the smoke of coal and tobacco, and herring being fried for high tea in the saloon.

The boy on the pier had only a very faint sense of revulsion from the spectacle. This was what he expected a pleasure-steamer of the estuary to look like on a hot afternoon in Fair Holiday week in that year of grace, 1885. Grown-ups in his own order of society used them

as conveyances to their coast houses but condemned them otherwise as floating public-houses for the mob, the despised and hated but not as yet feared mob. Let them drink and riot and rot; they bred like rabbits and would continue to produce an ample supply of labour, with a sufficiency of decent artisans and craftsmen emerging from the ruck. Queen Victoria was getting on to celebrate her Jubilee. The troubles in Egypt were but a memory, and that rascal Arabi Pasha had been put in his place at Tel-el-Kebir. Trade had its ups-and-downs, but the possibilities of expansion stretched to limitless horizons. The order was secure. That the mob in the pleasure steamer behaved like drunken chimpanzees on a few days each year troubled nobody, least of all the mob.

If Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant had been thirty years older he might have reflected thus, and without insincerity, as the *Caliph* touched at Ardhallow Pier and then paddled away to turn in the mouth of the loch and head upstream towards the city and its satellite towns from which her passengers had emerged for at least one free, untrammelled day of scenery, fresh air, dancing and drinking. Most of his interest, however, was in a boy of much his own age who, without waiting for the gangway to be run out, leapt from the starboard paddle-box on to the pier, almost into his arms.

"Hello, Juley!"

"Hello, Calum!"

The tones of these greetings were bright with friendship. The boy from the *Caliph* was shorter and broader in the shoulder than Julius, and his face was a little freckled mask of whimsicality.

"You should have been with us to-day," he said as they marched up the quay together. "We had a rare race with the *Heather*. She got away a length ahead at Haston, but we were half a length in front at Tomont, and old Bully Buchanan had to go full speed astern to save a smash."

"Go on!" cried Julius appreciatively.

"Cut my throat!" asserted Calum Bell gravely. "And Captain MacLachlan took the Narrows at low tide. You could see the weed hardly a yard from the sponsons."

"Go on!" Julius repeated.

"Cut my throat!" the other boy attested.

They turned off the road at the head of the pier and, crossing a marshy stretch of ground bright with yellow iris and wild orchis, started to clamber among the rocks above the high-tide mark. They reached at length the highest point of an outcrop of Red Sandstone and sat down together on a level stretch of the sun-baked stone.

Their actions had the quality of familiar custom. It was as if this occupation of a high vantage-point was part of their ritual of friendship.

Indeed, their young eyes commanded a view of greater splendour and significance than they were consciously aware of.

Their eyrie was on the spine of a promontory that marked the eastern point of a sea loch's entrance on the main estuary. To their right, northwards, this fjord ran some twenty miles into Highland country between steep and rugged hills. Before them the Firth stretched in the summer calm another twenty miles ahead into the sou'-west and half a dozen in breadth. It seemed an inland sea, enclosed on one side by high, romantic Highland hills and on the other by the gentler, greener slopes of the Lowlands, but sea-going vessels passing up and down near the southern shore asserted that mountain cones in the distance were island peaks, and that the waterway stretched in broad channels among a barrier archipelago to debouch at length on the turbulence of the Western Approaches. Had they been interested to look over their left shoulders they would have seen the town of Garvel stretched along miles of the southern shore, its industrial smoke rising high against steep Lowland foothills ; and there actually was in their ears, though they did not hear it, the faint clangour of a thousand hammers beating upon iron plates in its shipyards.

The silence between the boys was broken by Calum Bell, but his voice was subdued.

" Did you see her to-day ? " he asked.

" Yes but she was with her mother and Bet in the carriage," replied Julius morosely.

" Hard cheese ! " said Calum.

He was truly sympathetic if not urgently so. Himself adolescent, he appreciated and applauded his friend's romantic devotion to the legendary Flora Gillanders. He was a partisan. He regretted Julius's failure to meet the beloved one alone as he would have grieved had Fortune stepped in to prevent him sailing on the bridge of the *Caliph* with Captain MacLachlan. But with this regret for the failure of a proper enterprise went a deeper concern for Julius as an individual admired beyond the ordinary.

The brown eyes in the whimsical and freckled face glanced sideways at his companion. They had in clear view against the sea and the glowing light of the late afternoon a profile of astonishing beauty. Young Calum doted on that fine face, and with happiness. The line from the forehead to the root of the neck was so sweet in its purity and balance of contour. The scimitar curve of the nose resolved itself so excitingly in high, sensitive, shell-like nostrils. The colour of the other boy's skin was as pure and sweet as a girl's. Julius wore the crowning glory of flaxen hair that curled naturally and closely like a field well ploughed. It glowed with vitality in the summer sunlight.

He was a wonderful person this friend of his, thought Calum, and with such a strange past, such an exciting future!

Julius, unaware of this affectionate scrutiny, pointed a finger along the levels of the sea to a paddle-steamer that, with two funnels and a low, rakish outline, was making across the Firth at high speed.

"There's the *Sapphire*!" he exclaimed.

"No, that's the *Ruby*," Calum corrected him.

"It is not."

"It is sot," insisted Calum in the proper rhyming retort of boyhood. "The *Sapphire's* galley funnel is in front of the paddle-box. *Ruby* has it behind. That's the *Ruby*."

Julius's fair face flushed with annoyance, the colour spreading into the roots of the flaxen hair. Calum sought promptly to distract him.

"When I'm grown up," he said, "I'm going to be skipper of a river-steamer."

"When I come into my money, I'm going to have a steam yacht of my own," Julius retorted coldly.

"That fortune of yours!" Calum twitted him.

"You wait and see," said Julius petulantly.

Calum rose to his feet and looked down kindly on his friend.

"Better get home for tea," he suggested.

"I suppose so," Julius agreed.

They crossed among the yellow flags to the dusty road, passed the pier and the cluster of white cottages at its landward end, and went on under the walls and hedges of villas built for their summer pleasure in this sub-Highland province by the well-to-do of the industrial hinterland. (The regular five o'clock steamer from Garvel would decant on Ardhallow Pier a score of grave gentlemen in city clothes, in bowlers and square-topped hats of felt, the portentous papers they must study overnight in small leather handbags.) At a green gate in a white wall topped with a thick hedge of escallonia Calum paused to turn in.

"See you at seven then, Juley?" he said. "Terry thinks we should try for the mackerel off the Brunts before we go out to the Whiting Bank, but that won't be any good unless the wind rises. I tried to get him to bring a splash-net."

"I hope he does!" cried Julius eagerly. "But I'll see you at seven. So long!"

"So long!"

A hundred yards along the road Julius turned off it to pass through a carriage gate in iron, painted the colour of clay. Another mile farther on, before the lochside road degenerated into a track leading to a shepherd's cottage on the hillside, old Luckie Nicolson shuffled out of the south lodge to open the ornamental gates of Inverquey

House for the carriage-and-pair spanking down to the pier to meet the Master at the end of his forty-mile journey by rail and steamboat from the city.

2

Three subtly different orders of middle-class society and three dramatically different ways of living were symbolised in these various approaches to three different houses in one estuarine hamlet.

Whistling cheerfully, Calum Bell moved up an unkempt path on which bushes of fuchsia, syringa and flowering currant crowded so urgently that it had almost the tunnel-like atmosphere of a jungle track. This led to a terrace gravelled thickly enough, but untidy with tall weeds of docken and charlock. Between the terrace and the road was what might have been, and almost certainly once was, a trim and graciously-sloping lawn, now a paddock of rank grasses with a tangle of briars in the middle of it to show where once was a well-tended plot of roses. Behind this neglected garden, however, stood a square, white house of fine proportions, its windows freshly painted in bright green, its harled walls streaked as if by flame with the blossom of tropæolum, that Chilean plant which so strangely flourishes at its brightest in the West Highlands of Scotland. Clematis lavished purple flowers over a porch that had its door set in the northern wall, away from the prevailing winds. Two dormer-windows broken out of a slate roof completed a pattern of domestic architecture of an age—the date might be fixed at 1810—not yet tempted to advertise material progress in terms of the ornate.

This lovely old house was the manse of the parish minister of Ardhallow, the snugness of the fabric witnessing to the honesty and piety of the territorial patron. The untidiness of the garden, on the other hand, clearly confessed in the incumbent an indifference to appearances or perhaps (as a sensitive eye would have seen it) a disharmony in his ways of living and doing. This impression would have been strengthened by the fact that instead of making for the front porch into his father's house, young Calum Bell, still whistling blithely, passed by a well-worn path along its southern gable and so through an outhouse of the scullery order into a large, warm and gleaming kitchen, full of the enchantments of recent baking.

"So it's you," a tall, rather gaunt, grey-haired woman by the iron range greeted the boy's return, looking casually over her shoulder. "Your tea has been ready this twenty minutes past."

"Och, I'm not late, Kirsty!" the boy protested. "You're always complaining about something."

" Well, sit down to the table and get started," the woman returned. " I've got some nice ham-and-eggs in the pan for you."

" No sausages? You said . . ."

" I said ham-and-eggs, and ham-and-eggs it is. Sit down and stop arguing. Are your hands clean? "

The exchanges between these two human beings, though apparently hostile, were in fact perfectly equable. Thus they had communed together for some eight years ever since, a boy of eight, Calum Bell had been orphaned by the death of his mother and the Reverend Duncan Bell, M.A., had brought in Kirsty Colquhoun, the game-keeper's daughter from Tulloch, to be his housekeeper.

The middle-aged woman filled the plate before Calum direct from the sizzling pan.

" And I suppose you've been gallivanting from here to dear-knows-where since I saw you last? " she observed casually.

" Up the Kyles with Captain MacLachlan in the *Caliph*."

" That character! He drinks like a fish," Kirsty dismissed the master mariner. " And what's the ploy this night? "

" Out fishing with old Terry."

" That dirty Irish trash! See you and keep out of mischief. And," she added ominously, " if you are coming in late, and I've never seen you anything else, you be careful not to disturb the Minister."

Calum received these familiar injunctions with calm and went on eating heartily, passing from the ham-and-eggs to freshly baked scones and pancakes, fresh butter, honey, the new season's strawberry jam and all the other goodnesses of a natural country economy.

He was accustomed to respect the privacy of his father, and it was an arrangement that suited him very well. Sometimes, on winter nights, he had longed for a closer communion with, and a more direct kindness from, that remote man who bought books, and literally lived among stacked piles of books in his study, and existed on the thoughts of other men: so thoroughly lost in his own world that his only son was an unreal incident, his parochial duties of marriage, baptism and burial a series of interruptions, and his typical sermon a charming haze of tentative literary criticism and unhopeful speculation. But he was unobtrusive, gently kind when forced to recognise his son's existence, and no claimant to parental powers of discipline. The Manse of Ardhallow, managed with skill and address by Kirsty Colquhoun, was a happy home for a healthy boy turned sixteen.

The house simultaneously approached by Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant was of much the same size as the Manse but some sixty years younger in age and some centuries older in pattern. As against the white-harled walls of Calum's house it faced the westering sun with a

glow of a pink sandstone, stoutly and even sweetly finished by still-surviving craftsmen of mason-work. As against the square, fit classicism of the Manse, with nearly square little windows beautifully spaced in its white front, the villa called Bourtree ran to high windows of plate glass and extravagantly high-peaked false gables in that Bavarian or Alpine style which was the Victorian industrialist's honest attempt at the distinguished and beautiful in his domestic building. As against the dismal untidiness of the front garden down the road, the lawn before Bourtree was shaven by hired labour and diversified by trim, geometrical plots in which geraniums, antirrhinums and lobelia were tidily regimented. The garden's only concession to romance was a long pergola of rambler roses filling a flat space by the roadside.

Out of this bower, as Julius started up the smoothly gravelled and exquisitely edged path, emerged an aged lady, her gloved hands grasping a pair of secateurs.

"Ah, Julius!" she greeted her grandson calmly and with a queer little hint of the exotic in her intonation. "I have been attending to the roses. These were always your grandfather's, my husband's, favourites. But come, *mon cher*! I think I heard that gong of Alison's. We must never keep Alison waiting. And you have had an agreeable afternoon?"

The old woman was of remarkable physical distinction. Though nearly ninety years of age she still stood half a head taller than her grandson and held herself with a slender erectness that shamed his adolescent slouch. Her face was fine and of severe classical elegance, and though the skin was wrinkling now there was tone in it behind the parchment-pallor of great age. The eyes were bright and, while the hair was all white now, it was decked with a coquettish bow of black velvet, a clasp of brilliants in it, as if old Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born Barbara Rait of a French mother, was not yet quite prepared to let it be forgotten that she had once been a dark beauty. The girlish good looks of young Julius had clearly not stemmed from this austere root, except in so far as he had inherited from her the bold, curved nose. Indeed, as they sat down to table, a detached observer might reasonably have decided that the force of masculinity was all in the old woman, the vulnerable girlishness in the boy.

That table was laid with spotless napery of the rarest quality, with solid silver, the best Sheffield steel, glistening crystal and cut glass. It was served with reticent efficiency by the girl called Alison in starched cap and apron, so that young Julius, unlike young Calum in the Manse kitchen, was not called upon to reach out even for a finger of white bread. The room was small, but bright with white enamel, old mahogany highly polished, chintzes, and frail china in cabinets. It was perfumed by the scent of night stock in the plot outside the window.

"We start with a salad this evening, Julius," the old lady announced. "That is one thing I learned from my mother, your great-grandmother, who, being French, understood these matters. This one is made of cos lettuce, with shredded cheese, chives and a proper French dressing, *bien entendu*. It was a great favourite with my eldest son, your Uncle Walter, the distinguished scientist."

"Good!" Julius approved.

He tried to say it heartily but achieved only a sort of grudging growl. To tell the truth, the boy was pardonably weary of the old lady's continual references back in time, of her incessant praise of the menfolk of another generation and the comparison it seemed to his touchy nature to imply.

"Then we have a sea trout *meunière* with our own new potatoes, followed by your favourite chocolate *soufflée*. You will enjoy it, I am sure."

Julius did so indeed and with such singleness of purpose that the old lady had to rebuke him gently.

"You enjoy your supper, child?" she chuckled. "You must be hungry. But gently, gently! Conversation is the proper sauce to a good meal. You have not yet told me how your spent your day."

"Oh, I went to the Kyles in the *Caliph* with Calum Bell," the boy lied readily. "Captain MacLachlan invited us."

"Ah, that must have been pleasant and interesting!" his grandmother commented eagerly. "My husband, your paternal grandfather, the famous designer of ships, used to say that the whole history of steam shipbuilding was to be seen in the pleasure boats of the Firth. He was not himself a steamboat man. His most distinguished work was in sail. However, he was a man of a nature at once singularly just and generous, and he was at pains to explain to me how our native builders of steamships used these small craft for their most advanced experiments. *Alors*, we have on the Firth here a fleet unrivalled for efficiency. I trust the subject interests you, Julius. It would give me pleasure to see you following a family tradition.

"I'm going to have a steam yacht when I come into my money," said the boy, nearly truculent in his reaction to the reiterated theme.

The old lady's black eyes blazed at him. Her manner of speech, always exact, took an added precision in her displeasure.

"Money! A boy of seventeen to talk so! To count so crudely on money unearned, on money still dependent on another human life! You disgust me, Julius. Money is—*comme ça*!" And she snapped a boney middle finger against her thumb, producing a crack like a pistol-shot. "The only money worth having is that which a man earns by the sweat of his brow or by the elegant application of his thoughts. As your hostess, Julius, I beg of you never again to mention

the subject in my presence. As your guardian I forbid you to do so."

"Sorry!" Julius mumbled.

His pretty face was pink with shame and anger to the roots of his flaxen hair. He rose from the table with a muttered excuse, setting the spoon in his plate jangling and pulling the tablecloth awry.

"Let us forget the subject, then," suggested his grandmother equably. "You are going out again to-night."

"Going fishing with Calum and old Terry."

"That will be agreeable," the old lady said. "You will not be too late, I hope."

"I won't make a noise," returned Julius.

He departed in a huff, ungraciously leaving the door half-open behind him, and Barbara Oliphant stared at the vacant chair unhappily. Perhaps she had been too hard on the unhappy boy. Well she knew the precision of that French tongue of hers, her own intolerance of those ideas which did not accord with her senses of rightness, justice and economy. The child, in the toils of adolescence, was so vulnerable with those pretty looks of his and with such a strange boyhood behind him. It seemed only yesterday since she, Barbara Oliphant, at the age of eighty-one, in response to desperate letters from her daughter-in-law, had crossed the Atlantic alone by the *City of Rome* of the Anchor Line, battled her way through the frenzy of American life from New York to Baltimore and, for his own safety, taken a child of ten from the arms of a heart-broken mother and (what was to the point) the power of a brutally drunken stepfather.

Young Julius was to be pitied, and for his temperament as well as for his upbringing. With the clarity of great experience Barbara Oliphant knew that he lacked the fibre of her own Oliphant menfolk, and had, strangely, nothing of the gay, daft resilience of his father, her own son Ivie, lost at sea with the clipper ship *Constant Star*. She wondered if, from the pretty American mother, he had inherited the stresses of that dreadful Civil War from which Ivie had so romantically rescued her.

The facts remained in her French mind that the boy was difficult, over and above the gracelessness of his age, and that his future was incalculable. "Reuben, my first-born . . ." The tag and its sad burden kept running through her head as she sat by the now untidy table while the light of the evening poured into the room from above the Highland hills. It was a pity that she could not hope to live to see the youth set up in life for better or worse; for she knew, with an absolute certainty, that this man-child would always need a woman about him, whether for the lusts of his beautiful body or for the support of his erratic spirit. In her tidy mind Barbara Rait knew that his greatest need was of mothering.

Alison came in with a polite knock to clear away, and mistress and maid exchanged notes on housekeeping matters. It emerged that Alison would like the evening off to visit her mother, the cook at Inverquey, and old Mrs. Oliphant said that would suit her very well since she had letters to write and liked the house to herself for that exercise.

In the great kitchen at Inverquey, meanwhile, Alison's mother fretted even more than usual before the service of dinner. She was a short, fat, hot woman and had had a bad afternoon with her fire and her oven, and now the Mistress was late in ringing for the first course. The Master was home this hour past. Florence the tablemaid had seen him take his customary stroll, his hands clasped under the tails of his cutaway coat, past the classical statues and urns in plaster that adorned the terrace before the house. Florence had witnessed his return to the parlour for his glass of sherry wine. Now the half-hour had struck, and not a word from the Mistress. This would have the Master in one of his tirravees ; and indulging in one herself, thinking of the joint of beef which had to be served to the Master in a certain nice condition of redness, easily missed by a mere five minutes of overcooking, Alison's mother filled the large kitchen with shrill scoldings and had the kitchenmaid in a sad confusion of pouts and sulks and tears.

John Gillanders of Inverquey, ironfounder in Glasgow, stood with his back to the massive fireplace in his parlour, his stocky legs seemingly braced apart as if the rug were the heaving deck of a ship. Although the fireplace was filled with crinkly red paper instead of flaming coal and a great vase of desiccated bullrushes stood between him and the bars, he held up the tails of his coat with his clasped hands, as if the memories of winter warmth could still comfort his posterior and as if, indeed, that substantial promontory required such solace on this warm July evening.

" How long have we got to wait for this girl ? " he asked, not for the first time.

" How can I tell you, John ? " his wife protested with spirit from the sofa on which she sat with his copy of the *Evening Citizen*. " I didn't see her slip out. She had a book to return to Winnie Hepburn. She can't be long now."

The lady who spoke was a plump matron, once pretty. A student of phonetics would have observed that her accents were finer than those of her husband. The successful ironfounder had in fact taken in marriage the daughter of a Professor of Dogmatic Theology. Her fashionable bustle lay comfortably among the exuberant drapings of the sofa. Her skirt of black silk was heavily kilted with pink satin. Her tight bodice of black velvet buttoned slantwise across her rich

bosom and was decorated with loops of coloured ribbon, while matching ribbons made bows on the insteps of her shoes of black satin.

"We'll give her another five minutes. And if she is not back by then," said the ironfounder ominously, "I shall have a word or two to say."

"Have another glass of sherry, John," suggested his wife.

"I will."

He was a man of distinguished looks, if short of stature and of inexorably expanding girth. His face was pallid but finely chiselled. Bushy brows emphasised the hardness of deep-set eyes, but grey tufts of side whisker lent the face a curious air of bleakness. Below the clean-shaven chin that rested between the wings of a high collar a polka-dotted four-in-hand tie was decorated with a cameo-headed pin, but that was the man's only concession to sartorial gaiety. Of the finest quality, his dark clothes and buttoned boots were of solid construction. All in all, John Gillanders looked exactly what he was, the successful Victorian merchant.

The only and beloved daughter who kept him waiting in the parlour was keeping a rendezvous with Julius Oliphant, their intermediary the kitchenmaid, then suffering in consequence of the arrangement. From his grandmother's table the boy had slipped through the back garden on to the rough ground behind and, moving fast along sheep and cattle tracks among the hillside whins, waited under a low wall of old grey stones surmounted by the small oak, birch and hazel of the natural woodland that marked the eastern boundary of the Inverquey demesne. The girl, cunningly escaping from a side-door of the mansion while her mother dressed for the evening, slipped with the lightness and grace of a roe deer into a thicket of rhododendron and so by paths familiar from childhood, beyond the range of hothouses and kitchen garden and across a rushy clearing, into the secrecy of the copse.

She remained on the level of the embanking wall above him, looking down on his bright face. He raised adoring eyes to a goddess of the trees, and indeed, one hand holding to a hazel bough, she had a look of the fey in her nut-brown prettiness. They hardly knew each other as human beings. Their callow love was an emanation of their romantic imaginations. Their exchanges were halting, disjointed, as if the sense of urgency irked them and the arrangement of their next meeting was of more moment than the magic reality of this.

"I must fly," Flora kept insisting in an urgent whisper.

Suddenly the boy was overcome by the wonder of her presence. One foot in a crevice in the wall, one hand gripping a gnarled branch of scrub oak, and he had so hoisted himself that his face was on the level of her breast.

" You are lovely ! " he whispered. " Give me one kiss, dear ! "

She was enchanted by his boldness and undone by his beauty, and she stooped to meet his lips with hers. It was a mere brush of a kiss, shy and tentative, as if she was conscious of a presence in the thicket behind, but the softness of her lips and the warmth of her skin touching his had him on fire in a trice.

" Another ! "

" No, no, no ! " she whispered in alarm. " Oh, I must fly ! "

And that she did, turning from the boy in a whirl of Victorian skirts and crashing away among the small trees like an animal afraid.

She faced the parlour and her father with terror in her bosom, but she had in her the sparrow-courage and resource of the flirt.

" And where, may I ask, have you been, madam ? " the ominous voice greeted her while the heavy eyebrows lowered.

Flora, putting all she knew into a desperate effort, ran to him and threw her arms round his neck. She thrust her enchanting lips close against his.

" Oh, dear Papa ! " she cried. " Will you ever forgive me ? I had to return a book to Winnie, and we got gossiping, and I quite forgot the time. Please, Papa ! Flo's so sorry, so very sorry ! "

Another man than John Gillanders, ironfounder in Glasgow and successful Scottish man of business, would have kissed the wench and, perhaps, given the trig little bottom a fatherly smack of applause for her kittenish cleverness. He did not, however, hold with kissing in company or in public rooms. Instead, he disengaged the slender arms from his neck, saying :

" Very well, but don't let it happen again. I am not used to being kept waiting for my dinner."

He was pleased with the child, and happy. The fees for those two years at the finishing school in England had been money well invested. His property was intact. His three sons were all set up in business with sufficient capital, all well married, all engaged in the production of grandchildren to carry on the name and the business. Even so, at the age of fifty-seven, he remained in possession of a sufficiently handsome wife and a golden treasure in a pretty, loving and clever daughter. How could he know that he had lost her already ?

3

The evening was breathlessly still, the surface of the sea like a dark green enamel shot with bronze. It was so quiet that the conversation of people strolling on the shore road carried in clear snatches across

half a mile of water to the ears of those in the little boat that snubbed gently against the hold of its grapnel on the Whiting Bank.

Julius was exquisitely aware of the perfection of the evening. He consciously delighted in the darkness of the hillside behind which the sun had set an hour before, in the whiteness of villa and cottage walls against the shadowed greenery, and in the blueness of smoke rising lazily from the chimneys. A gleam of ruddy setting-sunlight reflected from a farmhouse window high up and far away on the other shore of the Firth had him searching in his memory for great lines of poetry. He thought sentimentally of the loveliness of Flora Gillanders and of the beauty and pathos of his devotion to her.

At the same time, Julius was thrilled to recognise the restless strength of the sea, apparently so placid about them. He could feel in his muscles its impatient pull along the overlapping strakes of the boat's bottom ; his fingers told how restlessly the tide tugged at the line in his hand, how it continually bounced the leaden weight at the end of it on the sand from fathoms deep below. It was extraordinary, when you came to think of it, and alarming, that three human lives should be thus surviving almost on the sea's own level, barely half an inch of planking and little more than a foot of freeboard between them and death.

He had the seat in the stern, his line over the starboard quarter. Calum Bell sat facing him on the first thwart, his line to port. In the bows, a battered hat, a line of grey stubble, a greasy edge of red cravat, and the stained back of some gentleman's discarded morning coat indicated the presence of old Terry, who looked forward out of the boat and used both his hands to hold two lines.

Julius saw Calum's eyes open suddenly, as if at a miraculous revelation, and his head jerk to see where his line met the water.

" Another ! " he ejaculated.

His thin brown hands pulled the line in featly, and the sea water spirted prettily from the stout cord as it came inboard in workmanlike loops. Calum hoisted the paternoster and its conical weight over the gunwale. A half-pound codling, with that lethargy which so strangely contrasts with the fighting vitality of the fresh-water fish, flapped from one of the hooks. The boy wrenched the barb out of its ugly mouth and threw the fish among the dead ones that already littered the floor-boards.

" Isn't that about enough ? " suggested Calum. " It's getting late."

" Yes, I'm feeling cold," agreed Julius, for it was now darkling and the chill of the night was running up his spine.

" I'll count what we've got," said Calum. " One, two, three . . . Terry, we've got thirty-seven. What about going home ? It must be getting late."

The scarecrow in the bows turned its head slowly and revealed to the boys an antique set of features compound in equal parts of humour and evil. The architecture of the skull was as unmistakably peasant-Irish as the Parthenon is ancient-Greek.

" So yez want back to yer beds and a hot water-bottle apiece ? " he teased the boys, a leering grin on his face. " An' them fine, big mackerel waitin' for us off the Brunts ! "

" You won't get any to-night in this flat calm," argued Calum. " If you had only brought the splash-net."

" Splashin', is it ! That ould devil Gillanders has a regiment of gamekeepers and a batthery of guns waitin' for me at the mouth of his burn, bad cess to him ! It's the mackerel or nothin'. They'll be fair rompin' in the flood, wind or no wind. Come, youse ! In with yer lines, and I'll up with the pick. The night's young. Take you the oars, Calum. We'll not be wanting to meddle about in the boat when it's no distance and the tide with you."

It was always old Terry's concern so to arrange his outings that a minimum of manual labour fell on himself. His survival was a triumph of cunning and blarney in highly-organised conjunction. Once a groom at Inverquey, when that house had been the home of territorial gentry, and dismissed for theft, poaching, alcoholism and unpunctuality, for fifty years he had survived on his wits amid an alien community, with only a few brief spells of imprisonment to break a long record of successful parasitism. In another age he would no doubt have enjoyed a lifelong career of killing, plunder and rape as a soldier of fortune.

The boat slipped easily over the glassy sea, driven by the blades which Calum handled, firm drive and neat feather from strong wrists, with the beautiful ease of one used from early childhood to handling small boats. The darkness was settling on shore and sea, and though it never would be wholly dark throughout the night of northern summer, the flashing beams of coastwise beacons, the street-lamps and windows of riparian townships, and the navigation lights of ships were asserting the fact of the sun's diurnal defeat. The air was chilly now, and Julius offered to take the oars from his friend. They made the exchange of places within a matter of seconds. The gothic face in the bows turned to grin at them.

" Is it beat ye are, young Calum Bell ? " old Terry sneered. " As for you, Master Oliphant, keep her head wide of the rocks, and we'll come in along the outside of the Big Brunt. I've a fancy this night that the big lads will be running hearty out there, and the tide makin' like Paddy O'Halloran's powney."

" You're daft, Terry," said Calum with blunt, familiar realism. " I've never caught a fish out there in my life. If they're running at all, it's among the islands."

"So it's learnin' your grandmother to suck eggs, is it?" came the wheedling sneer from the old man up forward. "And me after tellin' yez where the big boys will be friskin' and rompin' this night. Give us a bit of a touch with your right, Julius, me son, and we'll be out of the rips behind thon rocks. It's big fish we're going to catch this night, and its ould Terry Slavin that's tellin' yez."

On Calum Bell, now idle in the stern of the boat, these sayings had an uneasy effect, faint but disturbing to his deep understanding of the estuarine sea and its ways. He began to feel the dark mystery of the night and the tides about him. The rocky islets called the Brunts took on the ominous forms of basking monsters. The enormous wings of a heron flapping its way from shore to shore made such noises as might be those of the wings of death. There lurked in the boy's mind, sensitised by these phenomena of the night at sea, the legend of evil that was always about the person of old Terry Slavin.

His eyes were unresting, however, in noting the features of their situation. He plotted the familiar sea-marks by their peculiar flashes of white or red. He unconsciously catalogued the coasting vessels making down the opposite shore towards the Irish and Mersey ports; so well did he know his own bit of seascape that he could almost infallibly identify each vessel of a dozen by the rhythm of its screw drumming through and across four miles of water.

All his attention was ultimately fixed on the lights of a ship which, inward bound, was steering a strange course. She held to the northern shore of the Firth, miles out of the usual channel for ocean-going vessels, though safe in this peerless harbour so far as depth of water was concerned. When Calum first had her in sight he judged from the angle of the ruby port light that her skipper might perhaps be making for the Powder Buoy, hard by which, at a safe distance from the shore opposite the lights of the town of Garvel, ships carrying explosives were under obligation to anchor. Soon, however, he saw before him the perfect isosceles triangle of a ship heading straight for their tiny boat: white masthead light, emerald green low down to starboard, ruby red to port. He shouted as at the approach of danger, though the vessel was still more than a mile away.

"Look, Terry! That ship's heading straight for us. She'll pile herself up on the Brunts. We'd better clear out."

"Ach!" said the old man contemptuously, spitting over the side. "Some ould Scandinhoovian skipper of wan of thon German packets that does be bringin' in the raw sugar from Hamburg and them places. See that tall, skinny fool of a funnel he has on him. The ould man on the bridge 'll be shapin' to save money on a pilot."

"I never saw a ship take that daft course," retorted Calum with

conviction. " It looks queer to me. But, hullo ! He's altering course again, a bit to starboard. And he's slowing down."

" Let's take a turn out-by and see what it's all about," suggested Terry casually. Then he spoke quite sharply. " Get in them mackerel lines, Calum. And you, Julius, me bonny boy "—and he kicked the edge of the thwart on which the rower was sitting—" wake you out of yer beauty-sleep and skelp into them oars."

Julius had been nearly asleep, in fact, hypnotised by the rhythmic motion of rowing as a marching soldier may be virtually asleep over miles of straight road. He had been dreaming of Flora's face, which he had envisaged as a little nut of sweet, curved flesh resting in a hollow in a great expanse of white pillow with lace edges, the dark curls in a pretty order of disorder about it. Now, suddenly recalled to the harsh verities of the sea, he took alarm from old Terry's tone and from the look of anxiety on Calum's face

" What's wrong ? " he asked, and then asserted rather feebly, " I'm going home."

But he was still rowing the boat, now much more vigorously than before, and he heard the Irishman urging him.

" Skelp into it, me son, and we'll see what this ould sinner of a German skipper has on his mind.

He also heard Calum cry angrily : " I know what you're up to, you damned old Irish tinker."

Then there was old Terry, fiercely : " Wan other word out of yer face, ye damned Protestant bastard, and I'll fetch you a clout under the ear with the stretcher that's in me hand this moment. Easy now, you at the oars. She's comin' up like a fairy."

Shortly they were in the reverberating lee of a ship which, not big, seemed to heave a precipice of rusty plates above their little boat. A line was heaved from the ship's low after-deck and made fast by old Terry round the bow-thwart of the skiff. A man shouted gruffly and curtly from the bridge of the ugly freighter. Terry waved a hand. Another line passed, and Julius was bundled off the midships thwart to make way for it. Boxes and packages, small but substantial, were lowered down that endless line into the shell of the rowing boat ; and old Terry, active for the first time that evening, received them, stowed them, and passed up the empty loop of rope vehemently as if he were alone in the little boat, the boys safe in their beds ashore.

" Now ! " cried the old rascal at length.

He cast off the line by which they were being towed along with the ship. The vessel passed away from them into the darkness. The small boat, deeper than ever in the water, was a tiny thing on the gently heaving sea.

" Jump to the oars, the pair of yez ! " old Terry ordered roughly,

clambering over thwarts and packages to the stern. "An oar apiece—and row for home as if the devil himself was after yez."

The boys obeyed promptly, for they were both mortally afraid. They knew the gravity of the crime in which they had taken part. It had once been a boy's boast to say that he would on any fine night gleefully go smuggling the cigars and spirits brought in by the skippers of the beet sugar ships from Hamburg, but this reality was awful. In Julius's mind the ingrained terror of the law was complicated by a sudden panic fear that his part in this business must somehow drive him utterly out of the respectable world in which Flora Gillanders lived.

If that were not enough, there came at them through the gloaming from behind the rhythmical noise of rowlocks clicking to the swing of oars plied powerfully and with precision. Terry's head turned with a jerk and, staring past it with wide eyes, Julius saw the shape of a larger boat cutting towards them from behind the Brunts and perhaps a cable's length behind.

"Holy Christ! That's the Preventives in their gig, blast their dirty noses!" cried Terry. He turned on the boys with a string of vicious curses. "Row, ye bastards! Row till yer guts split! Row..."

The race was over nearly a mile of sea, and Julius at least despaired of lasting it out. The skin of his hands was wealed as if by the strokes of a hot whip. Wrists, arms, shoulders and back were racked by scalding pains. He felt that his aching head must droop and fall off in sheer exhaustion. As his breath began to go, so he started to sob, while the Irishman cursed and sneered and shook an angry fist in his face.

At length the bow of the boat crashed on the shingle of the familiar shore. The shock was such that the butt-end of his oar caught Julius under the chin and dazed him. He was confusedly aware of Terry Slavin jumping overside into the shallow water, of Calum leaping over the bows, and of both racing up the slope of the beach into the dark of the night; and he had the bitter, desperate feeling of being abandoned and betrayed. As he scrambled dizzily over the gunwale he heard the Preventive gig grounding somewhere near at hand and a confusion of shouting. He ran.

Heavy footsteps behind were faster than his. He knew himself blackly overtaken, jumped on, borne to the ground, his face in a clump of rushes. He was jerked to his feet by coarse hands at the nape of his neck. He turned to fight this tyrant over his egotism and got for his pains the clout of a fist on his jaw, and then knew himself to be blubbing with pain and humiliation.

"Here's one of them!" his captor shouted down the beach.

"Who is it?" came a distant voice.

"I think it's that Oliphant boy."

"Hold him tight, then. I'll be up."

A man in the quasi-naval uniform of the Customs and Excise stood above Julius. It struck the boy irrelevantly that his accents were Irish like Terry Slavin's, but softer and more refined.

"So this is one of them," the man said ominously. "What's your name, boy?"

"Julius Oliphant."

"There were three of yez in the boat? Who were the other two?"

"I won't tell you."

"You won't tell me, will you not, now? Mebbe a week in the clink and yourself up before the Sheriff will help you to change your mind," observed the officer. Then he chuckled kindly enough. "See here, me son, I know fine you had little enough to do with this smuggling business. You thought it was just a bit of a fishing trip? Aye—fine I know that. Now, I'm tellin' ye the truth, ye can go straight from here to your own bed if you'll just be tellin' me who was with you in thon boat. An' that'll be the end of it, too. Who was it, now?"

Julius, sobbing, could not find it in himself to answer.

"Was it Terry Slavin, now?" the wheedling voice persisted.

"Yes."

"There were three of yez in the boat. Who was the third man?"

"Calum Bell, the minister's son."

"So."

The Irishman stroked his chin.

"Right," he announced. "Off with you now, and no more of this nonsense." Then he added fiercely: "And be damned to you for a yellow-gutted coward!"

As he turned away, the flat of a big foot took Julius in the small of the back, and again he found himself abased, his face among the rushes.

4

Before the sun had dropped behind Beinn Dearg on the other side of the loch, Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born Barbara Rait, had decided that the physical frame of a ninety-year-old lady could not after all sustain the exertions prompted by an eager mind and a passion for tidiness in all things. The weeds in the plots of antirrhinum and geranium and lobelia and aslyssum, flourishing more extravagantly than the flowers in the soft, moist air of the West, outraged her sense of fitness to the point of hostility, and, in the clotted heat of the July evening, she had stooped over her enemies longer than was wise.

It followed (in her French mind) that the thin blood of the aged must thus be strained to pass through the thickening arteries and produce a shock or collapse ; and Barbara Rait thought with horror of being found in the article of death among her bedding plants, a disgusting huddle of thin flesh and brittle bones : of untidy hair and garments disarranged. A person of discretion . . . *ca va sans dire* . . would choose to die in bed . . . *comme il faut.* It was also much to the point that, stooping over the weeds, she had become aware of more than a mere giddiness, which was but to be expected, considering her own considerable height and great age ; it was to the point that, while she worked in the garden, a numbness had started to manifest itself in her arms, running down the limbs until the muscles of her hands were pringling with pins and needles and her fingers were as tufts of cotton-wool in their ineffectuality.

That she had taken for a sign and warning. She recalled the case of her brother Bob, her dead husband's partner, and admitted to herself (almost with a delight in the inevitability of the natural processes) that he had known precisely such symptoms before the fatal shock had taken him away to lie beside his mother in the cemetery on the hill behind Garvel. It was not enough to possess the ankles of a girl and (she trusted) an alert mind in the ninetieth year of one's age. It was necessary, on all counts, to conserve such energy as remained to one, especially to a woman with the responsibility for a difficult boy upon her.

Old Mrs. Oliphant therefore retired to a basket chair which, with rugs and cushions, Alison had placed on the terrace before she went out. It was agreeable to sit there in the peace of the evening ; it was even a pleasant circumstance that both Julius and Alison were from home. One enjoyed solitude in the evening, in the evening of life. Ah ! There was a pretty bit of symbolism, if sentimental. One had one's memories of a long lifetime, a tapestry as lengthy and varied as the famous one of Bayeaux, though it was sometimes difficult in great age to determine whether life was but a flash in time or a prolonged and tedious survival of days and months and years. Now, *alors* . . . now it was assuredly a race with time.

It was strange for a person of great age to reflect that the sun now setting beyond the ridge of Beinn Dearg had risen and set in precisely that order some thirty thousand times since the day of her birth ; and the thought prompted a philosophic state of mind. On the other hand, when one had had laid upon one, as an obligation of both love and duty, the task of supervising and regulating a young male person's entry into manhood—and such a remarkable person ; of such beauty, with such a strange history, and with such a fortune in prospect . . . *alors*, one wished, if with decent calm, that not so many sun-settings

lay behind and that one might fairly anticipate seeing other such evenings of beauty in summers to come. And that, concluded Mrs. Julius Oliphant, was not probable, even if possible. That numbness of the hands persisted, and she could not attempt the little tasks awaiting her in the work-basket which Alison, a thoughtful girl, had laid beside the basket-chair.

Alison was not late in returning, and she stood awhile by her mistress's chair.

"And you have seen your mother, Alison?" the old lady inquired cordially. "I hope she is very well."

"She's well enough," the girl admitted in the cautious Scots way; then she gushed with eagerness to gossip. "But there was a rare row up there before dinner. My mother was near dementit, what wi' the meat spoiling in the oven and the Master that particular."

"What was the trouble, Alison?"

"Oh, that lassie o' his, Miss Flora! It seems she was out till a' hours, and he kept ring, ring, ringin' for his dinner till my mother was near daft wi' the bells going and the joint over the turn. Yon lassie," added Alison significantly, "is a right handful if you ask me. There's a lad in't somewhere."

The allusion, which was indeed an invitation, passed over the serene head of old Mrs. Julius Oliphant.

"Flora Gillanders is a young girl of spirit and admirable looks," she pronounced tolerantly, "and if she is late for a meal once in a month, or even a week, no person of sense would regard the incident as important. We must never, Alison—what is the phrase? —*faire un chanson* . . . yes, make a song over those little things which keep happening, such as the sun setting behind the hill over there."

Alison considered the setting sun for a moment, her broad face of a peasant almost splendidly illuminated by its golden light, but she still had to stick to the point of human reality.

"Aye, but he's an awful difficult man, Mr. Gillanders," she insisted. "He's awful kind of—I don't know what you'd call it?"

"Severe? Autocratic? Even arrogant?" the old lady blandly suggested. "A word is nothing but a word. When you are older, Alison, and happily married, I trust, you will better understand these *nuances*. Mr. Gillanders is a gentleman by courtesy, but not *gentilhomme* by nature or tradition, if you understand me, my dear. Ah! It is all part of a story I have seen unfolding during my own lifetime, so long but still so short! The father of your Mr. Gillanders—and is it not a barbarous name?—was a farmer in Lanarkshire. Iron and coal were discovered to lie beneath his fields, and that at a time when these materials were required for the engineering and shipbuilding

industries of the district. You will therefore understand, Alison, that he acquired great wealth. It used to be said—how I remember these small things!—that this Gillanders *père*, so to speak, would drive in his carriage-and-pair to his mines and furnaces, or whatever it might be, though himself dressed as a working farmer, in moleskins and hob-nailed boots."

"That must have been awful!" cried Alison, sincerely shocked by this revelation of feudalism in decline.

"*Bien entendu!*" the old lady agreed readily. "But regard now his son, this Mr. John Gillanders for whom your mother so admirably manages the kitchen. He inherited considerable means, and he has greatly improved his fortune, for he is a man of energy and astuteness. But consider, *ma fille*, what he makes of his wealth, or does not make! He is so busy making more and more money that he has no leisure, no taste, no philosophy, no repose of mind or soul. There was no time to educate him or supply him with a culture in his youth; into the counting-house he must go as soon as his mere schooling is over. That great house of his is a positive museum of the ugly and inappropriate. Those hideous statues with which he has littered the natural gardens! I feel sure your mother, Alison, must often be heart-broken by the creature's inability to appreciate the subtleties of *la cuisine*."

"He likes his meat plain," supplied the girl, though a thought bemused among the intricacies of the old lady's argument.

"Plain! Yes. But with an understanding of the exquisite delicacy of the truly plain—the exquisite severity of a heart of lettuce properly dried; the sweetness of spring cabbage cooked with affection; the subtlety of a plain omelette? *Je m'en doute*. That type is rather a glutton of spiced sauces out of bottles. . . . Ah, those rich men of this iron age! All the money in the world to spend, and so little knowledge of how to spend it gracefully! It was otherwise in my time, Alison. My husband, the eminent designer of ships, was above all a man of exquisite taste, even though he had inherited a fortune. . . . But I grow too old, no doubt. Come, *ma chère fille*, you must help me to bed. I fear I must even ask you to help me undress. These foolish hands of mine . . ."

"Oh, they're stone-cold!" cried the warm-hearted girl, seizing them impulsively. "Come away you, now, and have a good rest. I'll get you a nice hot bottle."

Still the old lady could not sleep. She lay in her upstairs room, listening to the idle slap of the tides on the shore, and she heard the harsh cries of night-birds across the loch. She heard in due course the thud of oars in rowlocks, a crashing of boat's planks on the beach, and a shouting of male voices, but they did not perturb her; one

never knew what spirited youth would be up to next. The numbness in her hands still vexed her, and in that awareness of fatality which had clouded her evening she worried again, not over her grandson's holiday escapades, but over that future of his for which, she felt, he was so inadequately equipped. If only one, two—even three—more years of life could be vouchsafed her !

She heard the boy's footsteps along the shore road, his thoughtless slamming of the gate, the crunch of his feet on the gravel path. He would go into the dining-room to see what Alison had left out for him, but no—strange !—he came straight upstairs and into his room. But he was home again. One could now decently compose oneself for sleep. The story would be heard at the breakfast table.

The tired mind, however, refused to rest. It rambled over the past, over the huge expanse of memories amassed during eight decades of time. It seemed to look down lighted corridors on sunny vistas, so that the deaths of her dearest were almost happy landmarks. Her own father had died strangely on the coast of Peru, his legs shattered by a Spanish cannon-ball. Her son Walter lay in the cemetery at distant Pera above the Golden Horn, and Miss Nightingale herself (so ran the fond article of her faith) had laid a sheaf of roses on the grave. His younger brother, her dear, wild Ivie, young Julius's father, had gone down with his ship and all hands in the South Atlantic and had never seen his son. And the shock had killed her husband Julius, who had loved the shapes of ships and had lost a fortune in maintaining his faith in beauty.

How pleasant it was to dwell on the memories of such men and on the spacious circumstances of their period, while the graces of the Eighteenth Century still survived the impact of machinery ! Ah ! these had been gentlemen in the just sense of the word—by nature : men courteous and generous and of public spirit, artists in their chosen professions. Whereas, old Mrs. Oliphant regretted to think, the meaning of the word was changing. It was a nominal status acquired for cash by these grim, graceless, uncultured nabobs of the new iron industries. She had seen it begin in her cousin-by-marriage, Mark Oliphant, the late first Baron Alderford. She saw it established in the grim, able, righteous person of John Gillanders, Esq., of Inverquey, ironfounder in Glasgow, and in that ghastly tribe of statues in plaster reproduction with which he had populated his gardens.

And why should she care ? The old lady chuckled to herself over this untimely ebullition of passion in an aged person. Had she not arrived at a philosophy after so many years of observing the antics of human beings ? There was the bit. It always came back to that maggot of her secret worry about the fate of young Julius, gnawing away at the roots of placidity. It was so important that the matter

and manner of his entry to adult life and the responsibilities of wealth should be justly ordered within what remained to her of life.

Order . . . The passion of her French forebears worked in this elderly woman to keep her awake in the half-light of the northern night. The conviction that this order could be contrived only by herself came out of the undying vitality still contained within that frame, slender and graceful, which lay between the fine sheets, the bold profile and sparse white hair framed by the frivolous lace of her pillows. The boy bore the honoured name of a great and fine man. It followed that he must be guided and disciplined by a firm hand. *Alors.* . . .

She was suddenly startled by the hasty approach of two persons along the shore road ; it was a double-beat of urgency in the silence. The front gate clanged. The gravel clattered under the drive of anxious feet. Voices, a man's and a woman's, muttered below her window. A tug on the bell-pull started the door-bell clanging and swinging on its coiled springs in the kitchen.

An ache of fear filling her mind and seeming to choke her, old Mrs. Oliphant slipped out of bed. To dress for visitors at this hour ! Those numbed fingers betrayed her, and even her proud mind was befogged by alarm. She contrived to slip on a thick quilted dressing-gown and remembered, irrelevantly, that it was a gift from her dear Ivie, brought from China thirty years before. She heard the faithful Alison's door open and the patter of the girl's feet on the stairs. She followed, floating like a fine old ship in sail, a lace cap on her white head and, on her feet, a pair of pointed mules in red leather dramatically matching the peacock blue of the quilted dressing-gown.

It seemed as if a rabble had gathered in the hall. There were only three persons there : the Minister, and Kirsty his housekeeper, and Alison, but the two women were almost at each other's throats in a loud wrangle, while poor Mr. Bell stood helpless amid the frenzy of female partisans. Old Mrs. Oliphant took charge of the situation while half-way down the second flight of stairs.

" Alison ! Kirsty ! You forget yourselves in my house surely. Mr. Bell, let us go into the dining-room."

She sailed before her confused and timid guest, and though the two serving women followed them she made no objection.

" Alison, the candles on the mantelpiece, if you please. A glass of wine, Mr. Bell. No ? Well, now may I know how I can help you ? "

Kirsty was not to be held in. Her broad face was red with passion.

" Calum's in the jail ! " she cried. " That Julius of yours. . . ."

" That's a dirty lie, so it is ! " snarled Alison, banging on the table the box of matches with which she had lit the candles.

" Alison ! Kirsty ! " The old lady's temper was rising. " Must I

send you both to the kitchen, except that you would brawl there? This is a serious matter and demands order. Mr. Bell, I beg of you."

The Minister, who was clad as for his daytime duties except that he wore on his feet a pair of carpet-slippers, looked the most feckless of ambassadors. He ran his fingers through his long iron-grey hair and gazed shortsightedly and pathetically at his hostess through his steel-rimmed spectacles.

"I'm sorely afraid that what Kirsty says is true, Mrs. Oliphant," he submitted. "Macalpine, the policeman, a very decent man, was good enough to call on me half an hour ago. I fear I was still reading in my study. Perhaps you have not followed Professor Caird's latest speculations?"

"No," said Mrs. Oliphant decisively. "I think we are more concerned with this dreadful fact. If it involves . . ." She faltered a little. ". . . If it involves this household——"

"Aye, does it!" exploded Kirsty.

"Please, Kirsty!" the Minister pleaded. "Yes, I have it now. It seems, Mrs. Oliphant, that the boys were out on the loch to-night with that rascal Terry Slavin. It appears that they were led into some foolish smuggling exploit. Macalpine admitted as much. But there it is. My poor Calum is in the lock-up, and I thought I should consult you before I drive over and see what can be done."

"But Julius has been in his bed this hour past and more!"

"Aye, because he clyped on the other two."

The accusation came fiercely from Kirsty. Alison's denial was equally fierce, but the old lady silenced them with her eyes. The dialect word had hurt her and made her afraid again.

"Clyped?" she repeated, and her voice was not as decisive as usual. "You mean to suggest that Julius betrayed his companions by the giving of information?"

"That's what Macalpine says anyway!"

"Macalpine's a big stupid lump."

"Kirsty! Alison! Really! We get nowhere. Mr. Bell . . ."

But she felt that she was losing grip a little, and it was much that the Minister was a mild person.

"Whatever the beginnings of the business, Mrs. Oliphant," said Calum's father reasonably, "it is certain that they were chased ashore by the excisemen in their gig. Macalpine declares that Calum and Slavin managed to get away, but that Julius was caught on the shore. He further declares—and I do not necessarily accept the statement—that Julius revealed the names of his companions, and that the Preventive men were thus able to track them down. That is the story, I need hardly say . . ."

"It is quite enough," said Julius's grandmother.

She felt herself in danger of failing to handle the crisis. The Minister's syllogism, however, satisfied her sense of order. *Alors*, one must put forth an effort.

"We shall have Julius down here to give us his version of the story," she announced. "Alison, will you be good enough to knock Master Julius and ask him to come down, if he is not already awake?"

"The poor lad, at this unearthly hour!" mumbled the Minister sentimentally.

"It is important that we should have the truth in all things. Especially in matters affecting honour, courtesy, decency. . . . Ah, Julius!"

The boy stood before them. His curling hair gleamed in the candlelight, and the hearts of most women would have softened to his good looks, now smeared with weariness and confusion and fear. Perhaps only his grandmother saw the slight hang of his otherwise proud head and noted the sullen air of one on the defensive.

"Julius," she began, "I am told by Mr. Bell that Calum is in prison. It is said that you and he were with this man Slavin on a smuggling expedition. I am informed, to my grief, that you gave the information whereby your companions were identified and caught. Mr. Bell must hurry off now to see what he can do for his son, your friend. Will you please tell us what you know of this business?"

Mr. Bell demurred awkwardly: "This is very painful, Mrs. Oliphant. I feel sure that Julius . . ."

"If Julius's truth can help us, should we not hear it?"

"*Magna est veritas*," murmured the Minister helpfully, adding: "Invincible, one could say."

The boy, still standing by the door, did not answer. His grandmother saw that he was sobbing, his lovely head jerking boobishly to the convulsions. Her wisdom deserted her. Her mind flamed with anger, shame and lacerated pride.

"I ask you for the truth, Julius. I demand . . . I——"

Her powers of speech deserted her then. She knew within herself that the shock had at last come upon her. She was just able to make feeble passes with her trembling fingers towards her mouth to indicate, as intelligently as possible, that one of the higher functions had at length been denied her.

"My dear lady! My poor Mrs. Oliphant!"

So chanted the Minister, but he stood aghast and petrified. Alison ran forward and, dropping on her knees, started to chafe the old, thin hands, crying in a familiarity as of the nursery:

"It's all right, dear! It's all right! Alison won't leave you. Alison'll always be with you. Oh, mistress. . . . Please!"

Kirsty came forward, older and more capable.

" The poor old lady's had a turn," she said. " Stop that girning," she advised the girl, " and give me a hand to get her back to her bed. Minister, you'll need to help. Take you her feet. Alison and I will manage her head. Open that door, you ! " she commanded Julius.

Kirsty panted under her share of the weight of Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born Barbara Rait.

" We'll need hot bottles," she gasped.

" And I," asserted the Minister, " will run for Dr. Syme."

" My poor mistress ! " wept Alison.

The helpless body of his grandmother was thus carried past Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, and he saw the living eyes in the paralysed frame searching his face as she was borne away out of his life.

5

Over the period of a week Julius Oliphant was at least fleetingly aware of the degree of his former dependence on the old lady who died quietly at noon on the day following the brush with the Preventives.

He sobbed himself to sleep in the early morning, agonised by shame and fear and pity and self-pity in a confusion of hot, assaulting waves. Worn out, he then slept heavily until Alison, placing a tray by his bedside, wakened him. The room was full of daylight ; he could hear strange footsteps moving, albeit softly, about the house.

" What's the time ? " he asked.

" Ten," replied Alison curtly, drawing the curtains. She added severely : " You'd best eat up your breakfast quick and get dressed."

" Who's that moving about ? "

" Who would you expect ? " Alison was unfriendly. " The doctor's here, and the Queen's Nurse is with her. Kirsty's down in the kitchen, though I could be doing fine without her."

Alison's pretence of practicality broke down suddenly and completely.

" Oh, Master Julius ! " she sobbed openly, her pleasant face of a country girl contorted with grief. " We're going to lose the old mistress ! They say she'll never last the day. I canna bear it ! No. I canna bear it."

This was alarming ; and Julius felt angry, not understanding then that the order his grandmother had maintained, the order that had sustained him, was being withdrawn and was breaking down in the process. He was also afraid, as any healthy young person must be, of the nearness of death, for he was bewildered by a mythology compounded of the ideas of agony and corruptions unspeakable and paroxysms of grief over the death-bed. He decided that he could not,

would not, be prevailed upon to listen to the death-rattle, of which he had read.

Dressed, he was seeking to slip across the landing and down the stairs, when he was caught by the opening of the sick-room door. Dr. Syme, a plump and kindly man, halted him.

"I think you should come in to see her now, Julius," he suggested. "She's lying quite quiet; just asleep, dovering over as nice as you please. Come, lad!"

The firm hand under his arm coaxed Julius into the room. There she lay, as the doctor had said, just asleep. He considered the drawn, fine features for a moment, and then, forgetting the professional eye of the Queen's Nurse and in an access of honest emotion, he put out his hand and ran it gently over the indifferent forehead of the dying woman.

He looked up and caught the doctor's eye. The plump man nodded and motioned towards the door. Julius found his way of escape to the landing.

"That's the end of it for you, son," Dr. Syme was saying. "You'd best leave the rest of it to Nurse and me. Away out now and have a good walk to yourself."

A noon as brilliant and open as its predecessor greeted Julius out of doors, but he hardly knew what to do with it, so many were the considerations on his mind. What of Calum Bell, for instance? That was an alarming thought. Leaning over the sea-wall of the road, he was considering it uneasily when he saw the Minister himself come round the bend from the Manse. Mr. Bell carried in his hand the gilt-edged books of devotion. He crossed the road to where Julius, incapable of escape, unhappily awaited him.

"Ah, Julius, poor boy!" the simple man hailed him. "I suppose you are better out of the house at a time like this. It can be only a matter of hours now, Dr. Syme says. I am just going along to read to her. Or should I say *over* her, poor lady? Somehow, whenever I saw her in her great old age, I was always reminded of *Esmond*, of Beatrix coming down the stairs in that wonderful scene. You know your Thackeray, of course, Julius? A writer much underrated. It could be maintained. . . . But not now. Run along to the Manse, Julius, and have a word with Calum. . . . Oh, yes, indeed! He was home before Kirsty and I got back last night. Purely a matter of form, Macalpine was good enough to say."

The Minister bustled away with an expansive wave of an arm, and Julius turned to saunter down the road. People were being pretty decent, he reflected. Of course, the death of a grandmother was something. In fact, it was important when you came to think of it; and before he had gone far young Julius was beginning to see himself as

a romantic, almost tragic figure. He approached the Manse gates with much more confidence than he could have mustered an hour before.

Calum was bouncing a paintless gutta golf ball against one of the pillars. If he was aware of Julius's approach, he pretended not to be. His feats of throwing and catching, at all sorts of angles high and low, became the more spectacular as Julius drew nearer. He took a low volley off an angle of the pillar with his left hand almost under Julius's feet.

" Oh, hullo ! "

" Hullo, Calum ! "

The boys considered each other, much as two otherwise good-natured dogs will strut on stiff legs round a debatable lamp-post, not willingly hostile but exquisitely wary.

" I'm sorry about your grannie," said Calum.

" Oh, that's all right ! " said Julius. " I mean, it can't be helped."

A pause ensued, and Calum filled it with a dexterous bit of play with the black ball, against the angularities of the retaining wall above the shore this time. Julius was suddenly inspired to plunge into the heart of their mutual misunderstanding.

" That was a rotten business last night."

" Terry Slavin's a dirty old pig."

" They let you go ? "

" Och, that was just a lark ! The bobbies knew we had nothing to do with it. They gave me a rare feed at Mallig."

Yes ; people were being kind. The fact of imminent death seemed to wipe out all the rubs of life, as a damp cloth renews the virginity of a blackboard.

" I ought to be getting home again," said Julius.

" I suppose so," Calum agreed.

He bounced the golf ball violently and at a steep angle against the pillar, and, leaping with the muscularity of the ball itself, caught it in a hand stretched high above his head.

" We'll both have to be witnesses at old Terry's trial," he said.

" Oh ! " said Julius. " I suppose so. So long ! "

" So long ! "

He sauntered on towards the pier. The steamer *Edinburgh Castle*, with her lofty paddle-boxes and her owner-skipper in a bowler hat fuming on the nearest of them, came in with the usual load of trippers for Carrick at the loch-head. Melodeons jangled among the mob, and Julius saw a red-faced, hearty man go through the motion of toasting him with a beer-bottle, which he duly put to his lips and heartily swigged, thereafter wiping his mouth with a horizontal swipe of his disengaged, serge-jacketed arm. The usual Fair Holiday crowd

out for the day ; only five persons came ashore at Ardhallow and one sullen bull-calf in a sack. Julius was only mildly interested in the faintly exotic figure of a grey, professional-looking gentleman, who carried an umbrella and a small leather bag.

As the *Edinburgh Castle* thumped on her way up the loch, the curious beat of her single engine and the jangle of folk-music echoing in prophetic syncopation from the steep hillside, the boy slipped down the steps to his familiar place of contemplation on the cross-beam under the pier. The tide was low, and all the phantom fishes were gone into deeper water. The taints of sewage were in the hot, still air of the secret chamber. He abandoned it and walked up the spine of the pier to lie on the knoll where it joined the shore road.

Julius considered there, staring at the blue sky from underneath the hands locked over his eyes, the unique nature of his situation. He was a young person who had just survived the romance and excitement of a smuggling exploit ; and he was able to forget the incidental humiliations. For was he not also a boy remarkably glorified and protected by the fact that his grandmother was in the article of death ? This singular fact had removed all his difficulties and made his circumstances all the more unique. People were sorry for him ; people were kind. Hardly a mile away, Flora Gillanders was thinking of him ; there was no doubt about that. His situation had its drab features, to be sure. Behind his rapt absorption in its dramatic richness the boy was aware of defects of behaviour and appreciation, according to his own romantic standards, but these discomforts were little enough as against his queer sense of glory in the strangeness of the fate of Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant, whose mother and stepfather were in the almost forgotten United States and whose only link with the island life was in the act of breaking.

He was more desperately lonely then than he, or anybody else, ever knew. A whole complex of economic processes and social assumptions coalesced in the person of this beautiful boy, lying unbefriended on the shores of a Scottish sea-loch. Only two certainties supported him, one near and one distant. He did not wish to go back to the villa called Bourtree and face a death-bed scene. The day would come when the release of his fortune from America would completely free him from the subtle subjugations that irked him.

Julius lay on the knoll for a long time, but loneliness and hunger had their way with him at length, and he set off to saunter homewards. The clock in Mrs. Orr's General Stores, which was also the Post Office, told him that it was nearly two. He was just passing the Manse, lingering to see if Calum was about, when he heard the Minister hailing him from up the road.

"My poor lad ! " Mr. Bell greeted him, taking his arm and turning

him back towards his own gate. " My dear Julius, it is all over now. She slipped away quietly, your grandmother, and with the dignity one would expect of her. But still are her pleasant voices, her nightingales, awake—to take a liberty with Cory's inspired translation. Or was it a translation? I have always intended to examine the provenance of the verses and always have, as usual, neglected to do so. However, my poor boy, come into the Manse for a bite of food. Alison is bringing a bag with your things down from Bourtree. We have not too much time before the *Edinburgh Castle* comes back."

" Where am I going, Mr. Bell? " asked Julius, bewildered by this allusive speech.

They were treating him like a child again, and he had so privately and warmly planned to seek out Flora Gillanders and, in the secret wood behind her father's house, enjoy the benison of her pity and sorrow over his remarkable state.

" Where are you going? " the Minister repeated. " Garvel, of course, my dear boy. There the burial must take place. Mr. Pattullo, your family's man of affairs, came off the *Edinburgh Castle* this morning. Perhaps you saw him. We had, naturally, sent word to him. But now, Julius, we have little more than twenty minutes before we meet him at the pier. See——" They were in the Manse kitchen by now. " Kirsty has managed down to make you some sandwiches at least. And is that a jug of buttermilk I spy? Tuck in, boy, tuck in ! "

They overwhelmed him, those Others who had now taken charge of his life. He ate obediently, for he was very hungry.

The rest of his day was a confusion. Mr. Pattullo the lawyer proved to be a silent, cautious man. Perhaps he was shy; he had certainly no gift of dealing with the young.

" Do you like boats? " was the stiff sort of thing he kept saying as they crossed the Firth in the *Edinburgh Castle*.

You could do nothing against that obtuseness, and Julius saw little to encourage him in the aloof clean-shaven face with its stubborn jaw and cold grey eyes. Some indignation mingled with his bemusement in the question he dared to ask as the vessel angled towards the pier at Garvel.

" And what's going to happen to me now? "

" Ah, that ! Yes, I was going to speak about that," said Mr. Pattullo, apparently addressing somebody standing behind Julius's right shoulder. " Until after the funeral you will be living in lodgings with Mrs. Pettigrew on the Esplanade, a very nice lady and a distant relative of yours. But there's the whole trouble ! "

The lawyer's outburst was almost an accusation.

" You have no near-relatives : that's what it comes to. It may mean going back to the States. Then there's this confounded smuggling

case. We'll see, we'll see. It's very difficult, but we'll see. You'll certainly have to make up your mind to Garvel for the time being."

No comfort for a lonely boy was to be got out of that legal personality. Julius considered the sprawl of Garvel over so many square miles of the foothills and was desolated to know that he must become one of some sixty thousand souls.

The site of this northern industrial town was magnificent: a town built on slopes and spurs above the great anchorage, staring proudly enough across that expanse of tidal water towards a semi-circular frieze of mountains. He saw, and he knew, that its westerly suburbs were pleasant in the extreme, a dignified congeries of broad streets tree-lined and solid villas in fine gardens; and that the industrial centre of the place—an aspiration of towers, as it were, from the gantries of the shipyards fringing the Bay by way of innumerable kirk spires to the belching stack of the Paper Mill just under the skyline—had its own austere nobility as seen from the sea. He had lived a good deal of his life in this town. From his grandmother he had heard, interminably, the story of its development from a fisher village and of his own family's part therein. And still he was heart-broken to go ashore and become a part of it again.

All his young longing was to be back again in the small, warm world of Ardhallow. His passion was to be safe once more with Calum and Alison, with the Minister and Kirsty and, most of all, with Flora in the secret wood. He saw now what his grandmother had meant to him, and he was ready to weep for her. He knew the reality of what he had read in stories—a desperate instinct to plunge overboard and try to swim back to the securities of the world across the water.

Instead, trying to swallow the lump in his throat and hold back the tears from his eyes, he dutifully followed Mr. Pattullo down the gangway and, carrying his worldly goods in a Gladstone bag with straps which did not match, proceeded towards the incalculable dwelling of the unknown Mrs. Pettigrew.

6

The trial of Terry Slavin on the charge of smuggling, taken by the Sheriff-Substitute in the county town, was the talk of the countryside and of populous regions beyond for a week on end.

This was largely because the Procurator-Fiscal, opening the case, had quite justly and intelligently suggested that it "might prove to be the last of its kind to be heard in a British court of justice, at least insofar as it involved the open transference of uncustomed goods from vessel to vessel in coastal waters." The Fiscal, an earnest historian of

at least regional repute, went on to enlarge on the history of smuggling ; and the city newspapers, always so much more interested in the particular than the general, and eagerly picking the tit-bit from under the noses of mere printer-editors, had their best *verbatim* men on the job within an hour of the opening of the proceedings.

The case had no keener follower, the moral implications of it no more austere judge, than John Gillanders, Esq., of Inverquey.

This was but natural. The regrettable events had taken place within his own bailiwick, so to speak. As the largest landed proprietor in the district—saving the Duke himself, to be sure—he cherished a considerable degree of responsibility in the matter. As his wife and daughter learned somewhat painfully, and as they said to each other, the case " got on his mind " as the affair was endlessly discussed beforehand and all its odd implications anticipated, down to the rumour that the evidence of German witnesses would have to be laboriously interpreted, and as the parts in the escapade of two local boys, " of respectable parentage " at that, were ominously canvassed throughout a large and highly vocal country district.

The two women lived on edge throughout that half-hour before dinner when Papa, his glass of sherry wine in his hand, was apt to descant on the issues that emerged.

" Young rapscallions ! " was the standard gambit. " You talk about free education and equal opportunity for all, and look what comes of it ! "

Mrs. Gillanders, a woman who had learned to be placid but was yet not unsubtle, refrained from pointing out that she had never talked in any such sense and was therefore not responsible for the consequences. She was also silent on the point that neither boy had enjoyed the advantages of free education. Long used to being a target for her husband's prejudices, she had become adept in dodging the fire he directed at her as representing the stupidity of the public at large. She even knew that John Gillanders was fundamentally a just, honourable and even generous man, and that his outbursts against the irregularities of others were artillery salvoes in defence of his own profoundly-held notions of security.

" I may be stupid, John," she hazarded after reading the first reports of the trial, " but surely the evidence so far has made it perfectly clear that the boys understood they were going on a fishing trip and nothing else. They knew nothing of Slavin's scheme. The man himself has practically admitted it. The Bell boy actually protested. And, after all, they aren't accused, just witnesses."

Mrs. Gillanders had unconsciously developed a dry manner of speech that infuriated her husband.

" Yes, Crown witnesses ! " he exploded ; adding, in a wonderful

confusion of indignant notions: "Turning King's evidence! And all the bigger fools and louts and hooligans for hobnobbing with that dirty Irish rascal! What on earth are we coming to, I'd like to know?"

His wife refrained from offering a view on this large social question. Instead, she glanced towards her only daughter and saw the signs of concern on that fair young face. She had become aware, informed through that intricate ganglion of both sympathetic and competitive apprehensions which erratically directs female behaviour, that her child had an interest of the heart in this matter. She neither approved nor regretted the yearning towards that beautiful boy. It was a fact of nature. She was the mother of an only girl. Her first instinct was to protect.

The trial of Terence Slavin, though unduly protracted by the Fiscal's proclivity towards historical lore and by an adroit Glasgow-Irish solicitor's forensic ruses, ended in his conviction and sentence to eighteen months in prison. It then faded from the light minds of the journalists and therefore from the equally light minds of their readers, until, about a fortnight later, there came across the Atlantic a bit of news that, by the force of romantic coincidence, rekindled the fires of public interest in the affair.

The later afternoon edition of the *Garvel Courier* had the intelligence exclusively to itself, though the theme was largely expanded in next morning's city newspapers. In headlines bold for the period the *Courier* drew attention to a Romantic Echo of the Ardhallow Smuggling Case and referred to a Local Resident's Fortune from U.S.A. Thousands of greedy eyes read again and again the news item that followed these introductions:

> Advice has, we understand, been received by his legal advisers from correspondents in Baltimore, U.S.A., that our young fellow-townsman, Mr. Julius W. I. Oliphant, has come into a splendid fortune through the death of his mother, Mrs. Kitty Harland Green, in that city. It will be recalled that Mr. Oliphant, who is not yet of age, was a leading witness for the Crown in the recent case of smuggling at Ardhallow.
>
> The late Mrs. Green married in the first place Captain Ivie Oliphant, master of the Clipper ship *Constant Star* of this port, a famous product of the skill in ship-design of his distinguished father, Mr. Julius Oliphant, senr. On the loss of the vessel with all hands during one of the most famous races in the annals of the China Tea Trade, the young widow returned to her native country, inheriting through family interests in the Virginia tobacco trade the fortune which now passes to her son. Her second husband, Major Green of

Baltimore, is understood to have played a gallant part on the Confederate side in the Civil War.

Mr. Julius Oliphant, junr., who returned to this country some years ago to complete his education, resided with his paternal grandmother at Bay Cottage, Kempock Old Road, and in the summer months at Bourtree, Ardhallow. It will be recalled that this aged lady of the old school died in her 90th year about a fortnight past, within a few hours, in fact, of her grandson's unwilling but romantic participation in the exploits of the notorious Terence Slavin.

To be Crown witness in a case of smuggling and to inherit a fortune within a few days is excitement enough for any young gentleman; but to lose within the same period a beloved parent and a revered grandmother is to have the cup of life filled to the brim. The profound sympathy of his fellow-townsmen will, we feel sure, temper their rejoicing in his succession to a large sum of money, believed to be not far short of six figures.

Mrs. John Gillanders read this while, resting on her sofa in the parlour at Inverquey, she waited for her husband to come down from his dressing-room for his glass of sherry wine. It greatly excited her; it seemed a brilliant vindication of one of her few independent attitudes. She was about to cry out the news to Flora, reading on a stool at the window, but she heard her husband's footsteps along the passage and held herself for the exquisite, immediate moment of surprise.

"Have you seen this about Julius Oliphant?" she challenged his entrance, holding out the newspaper.

"I've heard too much about Julius Oliphant!" he answered coldly. "Too much for my liking! He crossed in the steamer this evening, and how he has the effrontery to show himself here after that scandal, I don't know. And what is it now?"

"He has come into a fortune."

"What's that? Come into a fortune?"

Mr. Gillanders accepted with dignity the paper his wife held out to him, but she saw that he proceeded to read every line with care to understand all the implications of the *Courier's* prose. She also saw out of the corner of her eye that Flora's head jerked from the book to glance at her father and then, as suddenly, return to her apparently prim occupation.

John Gillanders took a long time to read the story. He was a man deeply interested in money and the ramifying powers of money. He honestly believed that money was a reward of virtue, that it should be protected and cherished and managed in order that it might fructify. He also had, very near his heart, a passionate desire

that his only daughter should be set up in life within a secure fortalice of money.

"Not far short of six figures," he repeated at length gravely. "That's a lot of money."

"I'm heart-sorry for the boy," Mrs. Gillanders was quick to add. "He has hardly a relative in the world. Those lawyers have left him alone to settle up his grandmother's affairs in the village. Mrs. Orr at the Post Office told me this morning that he was coming to stay with the Bells at the Manse."

Iron Jock considered these remarks with the care they deserved. He sipped his sherry and pursed his lips.

"Well," he asked suddenly and roughly, as if he had been waiting for weeks to hear his wife make this obvious, sensible and benevolent suggestion, "why don't you ask him along?"

"I suppose we might," Mrs. Gillanders cunningly demurred. "Let me see . . . Friday?"

"Make it Saturday; I'm taking the whole day off. . . . Nearly six figures! That wants a bit of thinking about. That young chap will want some advising. . . . But there's the gong."

CHAPTER III

HIGH NOON

I

THE LINER *City of Madrid*, homeward bound from New York, raised her singularly pretty forefoot as, passing the Ambrose Light and meeting the first outrunners of the Atlantic swell, she started her eight-day battle against the Western Ocean.

Her elegant fiddle bow threw off salty little breakers, waterfalls and showers that gleamed and sparkled in the light of a chill October sunset. Her three black funnels and three square-rigged masts, as of a great private yacht, began to sway gently, so that the light high up on the foremast was like a genial comet of circumscribed range in its slow and regular curves against the darkling dome of sky above the ship. To every pitch over each crest of the increasing seas the vessel responded with a healthy groaning and creaking of her internal structure; the shudder along some four hundred feet from bow to stern acknowledging her willingness and fitness for the give-and-take of ocean voyaging.

In a large state-room aft and one deck below the poop—a state-room so very large and so furnished as to accord with the Victorian shipowner's notions of elegance, and priced accordingly. . . . In this large state-room a pretty girl of some nineteen summers was being assisted through the rather elaborate processes of dressing for dinner by a white-haired woman of advanced middle-age in correct black dress, white apron and starched white cap.

"There you are now, dearie!" said the Chief Stewardess of the *City of Madrid*, standing back to admire the results of her work with a comb on the ringlets that so fetchingly adorned the young lady's head.

"Do you think that ribbon's the right shade, Mrs. Peat?" the girl asked anxiously.

"Just right. As neat as Katie's leg," the Chief Stewardess replied. "It suits you a rare treat."

The *City of Madrid* shuddered over a big sea coming up from the southern wastes of the ocean.

"What's that?" cried young Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born Flora Gillanders, clutching the edge of the built-in dressing-table. "It will be awful if I'm sick!"

"Ye'll no' be sick unless ye want to be," said the Chief Stewardess realistically. "Just you forget about being sick. Ye're too bonnie for that. And there's your man up-bye, waitin' for ye, and the Captain . . ."

The girl rose from the stool and in the arrogance of her prettiness, almost unconsciously, pirouetted before her assistant.

"Ye'll do fine," said Mrs. Peat. "I like these new fashions. That's an awful pretty train. I like that yellow brocade. And the gold net with the pearls on the front's lovely! Is your bustle sitting right, dear?"

"It's those bust-improvers," said the girl pettishly, tugging at her upper garments.

"Stop that!" cried the Chief Stewardess peremptorily. "All my night's work. . . . Ye're no' needing," she added lewdly, "a hank of cloth and whalebone to improve your bust. There now, dearie! A perfect picture! A real treat! I'll see you're shown to your place when the bell goes. Ye'll remember that ye sit on the Captain's right hand. He's awful pernicketty about that sort of thing, is Captain Brewster."

Meanwhile, in his own cabin under the bridge, Captain Brewster was entertaining Mr. Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant over a glass of sherry wine. He did so with the nice blend of bonhomie, authority and deference brought to such occasions by liner officers who, the weight of responsibility always upon their shoulders, must yet defer to the wealthy passengers recommended to their care and attention by the Directors.

Money talks persuasively to all save the saints among men. Captain Duncan Brewster had carried across the Atlantic men richer, wiser, nobler and more powerful than this young Mr. Oliphant. He did not think greatly of his present guest. Just a bit laddie, he reflected, and a sight too good-looking and dandified, with those fancy frills on his dress shirt and a silly wee apology of a ginger moustache. As between the profundity of his seafaring experience, the deep and ever-present consciousness of his responsibility, on the one hand, and the immaturity of this mere boy on the other, any frankness or reality of communication was impossible. Still, this was young Mr. Oliphant of the well-known Garvel family, possessed of a tidy fortune out of American tobacco, newly wedded to the daughter of "Iron Jock" Gillanders—a tidy bit of goods, too—and specially recommended to his attention by the Chairman himself. You never knew. Money always talks.

"This is a fine ship of yours, Captain," the young man was saying, making a gallant pass at maturity of judgment and diction. "I like her lines."

"Aye, a bonnie ship, sir," the skipper agreed. "A wee thing cranky in a sea, mind you. You always have to pay for fine lines somehow. And whiles I could be doing with ten more revolutions out of old Maconachie's engine. You haven't met the Chief yet? You will; and getting a word or a penny out of him is like getting blood out of a stone. Still, as you say, Mr. Oliphant, the old *City* is a fine ship, as pretty as a yacht."

"I'm having a yacht built," the young man mentioned casually. "A steam yacht. By Ramage's of Leith."

"Good builders. Turn out a rare job. Shapely, too."

"Not one of the very big ones, of course," Julius was eager to explain. "Just ninety feet overall. Two hundred horse-power triple expansion engines. Ramage's guarantee twelve knots."

"A tidy job," said Captain Brewster slowly and thoughtfully. "You'll need a crew of eight—or mebbe ten, depending on the Steward department you fancy. And a good skipper."

There it was. You never knew. The Directors weren't so forthcoming with either pay or pension that even the master of a crack Western Ocean liner could neglect the prospect of a comfortable last decade of life in a gentleman's yacht in coastal waters. A picnic. A nice wee villa at Hamilton's Quay or up the loch at Kilree. Pottering about the boatyards, amid the agreeable and workmanlike odours of paint and teak, and swopping yarns with other old salts on the beach during the winter months. Growing green things in a walled garden.

"You'll be giving the yacht a pretty name?" suggested Captain Brewster. "Perhaps the name of a pretty lady we both know?"

"You're right, Captain!" agreed Julius, blushing. "*Flora* she's to be christened. It would be nice if you could manage through to the launch."

"I might manage that. In fact, I'll try hard," said Captain Brewster. "But come now, sir. They'll be serving dinner in a jiffy, and we mustn't keep Her Ladyship waiting. You'll be sitting at the head of the big table with me, of course; the Chief Steward would tell you that. Unless you'd fancy a hair of the tail? No, well, we'll go aft. I'll lead the way, if you please."

The cabin dining saloon of s.s. *City of Madrid* was a very passable imitation of a banqueting hall in some Gothic mansion. The builders had somehow contrived to get height and depth into it, largely by thrusting a coach-roof of coloured glass through the vessel's after-deck and by apparently propping up this structure with square-fluted pillars in the Theban manner. (How could the passengers know that these elegant supports had at their cores girders of metal supplied by Iron Jock?) Three long tables, glistening with spotless napery and shining glass, bright with flowers and silver-plated dishes heaped

high with grapes and apples, peaches and oranges, gave the chamber the proper air of a refectory singularly well found. With the rank-and-file of the cabin passengers already in their places, the copious array of stewards at attention behind them, white jackets and spotless napkins over stiff left arms, the scene was quite brilliantly set for the entrance of those who were still to fill the little cluster of empty chairs to the right and left of the Captain's sacred seat at the head of the central table.

Most of the cabin passengers were already seated and, agog with the inevitable curiosities of the first night at sea, watched the main entrance to the saloon as for a State entry. Most of them knew very well who occupied the Bridal Suite and of what romance clung about the figures of young Mr. and Mrs. Julius Oliphant. The newspapers of New York had not failed to make a good story of their arrival for the honeymoon in the land of the free. The remarkably good looks of the young pilgrims had more than amply compensated for the lack of royal or even aristocratic status. One bright sheet summed it up with—PAIR OF SCOTCH LOVE-BIRDS RETURN TO CLAIM AMERICAN TOBACCO FORTUNE. It was also suggested by this newspaper that Handsome Bridegroom Declares He Won't Recognise Ma's Home Town, and that Scotch Iron Magnate's Daughter Says New York "Lovely!"—the reporter adding gallantly, "and that goes for this winsome Flower of the Heather herself." The story was picked up and amplified as the young people moved with almost ambassadorial status from New York to Washington, to Baltimore, to Wilmington, North Carolina, until the sum of their joint fortunes ran into inches of noughts in American dollars. Flora faithfully pasted every cutting into a scrap-book bound in blue morocco, which Julius bought for her on Fifth Avenue.

There was therefore something like a hush in the saloon when the Chief Steward of s.s. *City of Madrid* opened the doors and the bearded Captain entered with his guests. From the assembled women-folk there issued an almost audible gasp as Flora's youth and loveliness and brilliant clothes brought an assurance of the glory of living into that rather stuffy and almost submarine compartment. She blushed prettily as Captain Brewster handed her to her seat; and by a divine stroke of intuition, she smiled and half-curtsied like a princess to the company in general; at which two American girls at the wrong end of a side-table rose and waved their gloves in generous salute to a mistress of their own arts. The ladies gasped again as the fine rich lights of the lamps took Julius's curling bright hair and revealed the noble modelling of his features.

Captain Brewster's attentions to Flora were assiduous, and as she blushed and laughed and even giggled at his practised compliments

he thought her a very pleasant young lady indeed. On his other hand, however, Julius was making heavy weather of it with the Doctor, a costive graduate of Aberdeen and, like Julius himself, handicapped by social inexperience and a limited intellectual range. Flora's husband had some difficulty in attracting even a small share of the Captain's attention.

"I believe," he at length contrived to get in a word edgeways, "you have a young officer called Bell on board—Calum Bell."

"Bell? Calum Bell?" the great man demurred, at length admitting with a laugh: "Oh, yes! Though I doubt if my Directors, or the Board of Trade for that matter, would agree to call him an officer. You *might* call him extra eighth mate or something like that, but he's just the senior apprentice to me. Quite a good lad, though."

"I'd like to see him," said Julius.

"Well, I think that could be arranged. Yes, we might get it arranged. As his duties allow, of course."

Julius perceived that Captain Brewster was displeased; he would have put it that Captain Brewster was jealous of his rich passenger's interest in an underling; and Julius was nettled. He wasn't paying a lot of money for the most luxurious accommodation in the *City of Madrid* without having his privileges; and he was himself (though he would never have dreamed of phrasing it so) jealous of Captain Brewster and his success with Flora. The old beggar, now he came to look at him closely, had full, red, wet lips within the respectable framework of grizzled beard and moustache.

"I wonder if I could see him to-night, after dinner?"

"To-night? Well, of course, Mr. Oliphant, if it's your wish. If he's not on watch, of course. Certainly."

"My wife will be turning in early," said Julius. "She's tired. But I'll be in our private cabin."

"Certainly, certainly!" agreed Captain Brewster.

There it was again, the ever-pleasing power of the fortune behind him that had enchanted Julius ever since it fell to him. Even the quasi-sovereign power of the master of a British ship could not withstand it. It was a lovely thing, this power; it made a fellow feel good, even generous, through being above the ruck and their worries and struggles. And, anyhow, that damned old flirtatious ass of a skipper, who probably got about seven pounds a week, if that, had been damn' well put in his place.

When the fruit plates had been pushed aside, Julius was pleased to catch Flora's eye and indicate by a nod that her real lord and master desired to retire to their private apartments. Captain Brewster bowed them out with ceremony and an assurance to Julius that young Bell would be sent along shortly.

In his office-cabin, a little later on, the Chief Steward of the *City of Madrid* gave the Purser a full account, indecent in some of its passages, of the scene and situation at the Captain's table during dinner.

"You could see the Old Man was fair' taken wi' the lassie," he reported. "Ye ken what he is?"

"Aye, when there's a bit of skirt near-hand," agreed the Purser morosely. "It's another story when you hand him his mess-bills."

"Aye. Well, there was Old Brew' wagging his beard at the lassie, and thon big lips of his fair' slavering; and the young lad, he sat glowering as if he could cut the Old Man's throat. . . ."

"Pity he didn't," observed the Purser. "I'll have another of your Guinnesses, Chief."

They were joined by the Chief Stewardess.

"Your usual, Aggie?" suggested the host of the evening, holding up a bottle of Bass.

"No. I'll have a drop of spirits to-night, Chief," said Mrs. Peat. "The day of it I've had! If you had the job of dressing and undressing that lassie in Number One——"

"Juist you try me on the last bit!" cried the Chief Steward jocularly.

The three professionals laughed together, harshly and sardonically. They spent most of their lives serving the rich and the powerful. Beyond any illusions whatsoever, they recognised and tacitly admitted to each other that the experience was at once saddening, humiliating, sardonically amusing and profitable. They discussed the new situation in the ship, but knew that it would change utterly within a fortnight, a new and probably petty drama of egotism unfolding before their eyes.

"Anyhow, the Old Man didny get her up to his cabin," the Chief Steward summed up.

"She's mebbe got the sense to like them young," said the Purser sourly.

"He's a bonnie boy, mind ye," observed the Chief Stewardess.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!" cackled the Chief Steward; then turning to really serious matters: "Your usual Bass now, Aggie?"

"Thank ye, Jim." She concluded philosophically: "Well, well! It takes a' sorts to make a world. I've seen a sight worse than these two in Number One. They're just a couple of bairns. Just a couple of bairns."

"I'll have another of your Guinnesses, Jim," said the Purser. "They're travellin' well this trip."

Meanwhile, Julius and Flora had greeted their old friend of the Ardhallow days, the former with heartiness, the latter with grace at least. Flora had never, however, been suffered to regard the minister's

boy as an equal, and she was shrewdly aware of his complete indifference to her charms. Well, if it was Julius he wanted to speak to, she would be glad to return to the sleeping cabin with her novel. She was a great one for a good romantic novel was Flora, and now she was absorbed in Mrs. Campbell Praed's *December Roses*, which she thought lovely.

On her gracious if somewhat fussy retiral the two young men fell into that easy frankness of intercourse which is the defence of their sex against the feminine intrusions. For all his consciousness of power and position Julius was happy to pass out of the state of stiffness and seniority imposed on him by his wealth ; for an hour at least he could stoop to and enjoy the purely human equalities. He got a decanter and glasses and placed them on the table before his friend.

" I am glad you sent for me, Julius," Calum was saying eagerly. " I would have asked leave to wait on you, but Old Brew' doesn't encourage junior officers to hobnob with first-class passengers. There's something I wanted to discuss with you, seriously."

" What's that ? "

" A shipowning scheme. To run steamers on the Firth. I've got an absolutely new idea about it. There's a fortune in it ! "

Calum's freckled face and dark eyes were bright with eagerness. Julius laughed at the familiar signs.

" Still got that old bee in your bonnet, Calum ? "

" Yes, and it has been working hard. I know the Firth like the back of my hand, Julius. I've knocked about the steamers since I was so-high. I know the industry inside out. You'll admit that ? Well, I also know that it's going to bits and pieces through cut-throat competition, and that the men with the new ideas are going to scoop the pool. I've *got* the idea ! It's all on paper, but now that I've seen you . . ."

" Fire ahead," said Julius.

As he listened to the eager discourse, Calum's enthusiasm bubbling over in a shower of arguments and technicalities and figures, Julius knew a strange feeling of satisfaction and relief.

This was business ; this was himself being consulted on a constructive issue as a solid man of affairs. He recalled the grave advice of both his father-in-law and his lawyer, couched in almost identical phrases : " You should be looking round for something to keep you busy, something you can develop on your own account. Money makes money, you know." Julius was all for surprising his mentors, all for exercising the new power that had come to him.

He helped himself again from the decanter, aware at the same time of the need to be cautious, to keep the sum of capital intact.

" Yes," he agreed with Calum, speaking slowly. " I see the idea.

It's a good one, Calum. But it would cost a fortune to build a fleet of steamers like that. Mine isn't so big as some people make out."

"But you don't build a fleet!" the enthusiastic voice protested. "You start with one ship, run on the lines I've been talking about. I know where we could lay our hands on one now—a beauty, cheap—just because old Tom Kennedy, who ordered her from J. & G. Thomson, can't stand up to the cut-throat competition. Only a few thousands. She could be ready for next season. Then you make profits and you create credit—*credit*, Julius—and you order another. And so on. Lord, Juley! If I had your money to invest . . ."

"It's an idea," admitted Julius judicially. "It's a good idea. Now, I'll think about that, Calum. We must have another talk. There are some details. . . . Help yourself and pass the decanter."

Flora was asleep when he rejoined her in the sleeping-cabin. The light still burned above her bed; one finger of her right hand still marked the place in the book that rose and fell to her breathing. Her mouth was slightly open, and in that single moment of vision Julius was made aware of a vulnerability of softness in the girl he had married. Her eyes opened as he began to move about the cabin.

"Hullo, darling!" she murmured drowsily. "You're awfully late."

"Sorry, darling! Go to sleep."

"Kiss me, Juley."

He obeyed with a smile, but perfunctorily in Flora's estimation. As he turned away to take off his buttoned boots in glacé kid she saw that he was preoccupied. His breath smelt of drink. Flora was annoyed, for in their few weeks of married life she had learned that, in this condition, her precious Julius was in no mood to make love; and being made love to was for Flora the major part of existence. He would just kiss her once or twice then turn over on his side, away from her, and retire into his own mysterious personality. But she had also learned that, with Julius, there was just no use making a little scene of injured, lovely girlishness to win him back. He could be dreadfully stubborn and cold.

"Had your friend anything interesting to say?" she asked.

"Something very interesting. Now go to sleep, dearest. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

The distant look was still in his eyes as he kissed her good-night and as, in the mystery of the Atlantic night without, eight bells rang from under the bridge.

2

The rain swept in drifts along the steamboat pier at Garvel. The cloud was low over the Firth, and the sou'-westerly wind whipped the drift off the short seas of an ebbing tide and forced them back to mark, as with a line of dirty cream, the level of the sand-banks beyond the dredged channel. An unrelenting greyness was over everything, seeming to saturate and take the colour out of even the red tiles and red bricks and pastel green paint of the tall station buildings.

This dreary effect of nature's defeat of human aspirations was most pronounced in the droop of the bunting which dressed a vessel lying at the westermost berth of the landing-stage. The array of signal-flags, normally so saucy, frivolous and pretty, was so sodden by the West Scottish rain that the triangular pennants in the bravest of the primary colours hung sullen and obfuse in the strongest gusts. The two funnels of this elegant paddle-steamer were so assaulted by the driving rain that the buff paint on their forward curves was visibly losing colour. Only a row of cast-iron bollards peopled the rain-swept quay.

A disinterested observer of the scene would have concluded, rightly, that a gala occasion involving the two-funnelled steamer was in danger of being ruined at the outset. The clocks on the Bavarian towers of the station buildings declared the hour to be five minutes past ten. The dressing of the ship clearly indicated a hopeful intention to sail the Firth and its indentations with a party of some consequence on board. And here and now was desolation, with only a few early-comers of the humbler sort sheltering in the archways of the covered passages leading down from the station; wearing mackintoshes and carrying wraps; wondering, no doubt, if the fine promise on the embossed cards of invitation to the Opening Cruise of the New and Luxurious P.S. *Heather Bell* was to be dashed after all, and though this was the fourth day of June.

As the great hands of the clocks on the station towers jerked from minute to minute, however, a thin stream of four-wheeled cabs, thickening to a freshet as the half-hour neared, started to pour on to the landing-stage down the approach from the town proper. Out of these square vehicles emerged individuals or small family parties, each in his, her or its way thoroughly representative of the middle-classes of industrial Scotland towards the end of the eighth decade of the Nineteenth Century of the Christian era.

They were all marvellously wrapped up against the treacherous weather that was one of their familiar conditions of living. Inverness capes, mackintoshes, large umbrellas, hooded cloaks, leggings and even goloshes were to be seen billowing and flashing as their owners

hurried from the cabs over the cobbles of the quay, across the narrow wooden gangway on to the steamer, and into the shelter of the deck-house below the after funnel. Thus heartened, the loiterers in the archways plucked up social courage and darted through the rain to join their more distinguished fellow-citizens already on board. Finally, a train from the city was to be heard panting into the station above the pier, and shortly another party of perhaps fifty persons gathered in the mouth of the carriageway, flinched momentarily at the sight of the slashing rain, and then darted in twos and threes towards the waiting vessel, the ladies among them giving a fine display of coloured petticoats held high above buttoned boots.

All these good Victorian people, most of them persons of substance and at least regional position, were well used to the vagaries of their native weather and were not in the least daunted by this inauspicious start to the Opening Cruise of the latest addition to the fleet of pleasure steamers plying on the Firth. On going below, indeed, they were one and all astounded and delighted by the elegance of the arrangements made for their reception. Nothing like it had been seen in that part of the globe before.

Within the entrance to the deckhouse stood two stalwart sailors, both clad in white blouses of Navy pattern and white-topped naval caps, with the ship's name in gold lettering on the band. Their function was to pluck the aged and the frail from the rude arms of the weather and to direct them into the hands of stewards and stewardesses ; the former in white jackets, the latter in trig caps and aprons ; who had made of the after part of the deckhouse a cloak-room, most politely and assiduously assisted in the removal of sodden outer garments, and vastly surprised their owners by handing him or her a numbered ticket in earnest of the deposit. If that was not enough, a page-boy in skin-fitting uniform of light blue with a constellation of round silver buttons down the front, stood at the head of a stairway, bawling at regular intervals : " Wull passengers please pass doon to the saloon. Wull passengers . . ."

It was not noted by the company that the child was clearly unused to making formal announcements, that he had been a thought imperfectly rehearsed in a part, and that his accent was indubitably of Glasgow. But he represented something very strange and new in the way of amenity ; and, in any event, the observant among the guests of the day were more taken by the fact that the companionway over which the infant presided was not the familiar affair of iron rails and steps but a proper staircase with well-turned banisters and wooden treads, wax-clothed and brass-edged.

" A perfect palace ! " an elderly gentleman in frock-coat and a high, square felt hat was heard to observe, broadening and holding

the vowels in the Lowland Scots way. " You wouldn't see the like of it in a London hotel ! "

The exclamations of praise and surprise rose in a crescendo as the company, bowing and nodding and smiling, assembled in the saloon. This was a considerable chamber, some forty feet in length and, filling the whole breadth of the ship, with an air something between that of a drawing-room and that of a good restaurant. The floor space was largely occupied by three-sided alcoves of seats, upholstered in red plush with trimmings and tassels of cream silk. The slender pillars that supported the raised quarterdeck above had their raw iron agreeably concealed under coats of silver paint. Each small oblong window had its pair of curtains in tasselled green brocade, gathered at the lower ends with thick silken cords in cream. The intermediate panels, depicting Grecian scenes of the chastest order, were in white lincrusta. At the after end of the saloon, almost over the vessel's rudder, an upright Carron stove burned brightly. Normally, the central passage would have been open and free for all, but on this gala day it was filled—as the *Garvel Courier* put it on the following day—by " an extension of tables, the groaning board bearing the choicest elements of a cold collation, from the delectable roe of the Volga sturgeon to the boiled haunches of sundry well-fattened members of the porcine population of Yorkshire."

What most deeply impressed the *Courier's* reporter was the total absence from the feast of alcoholic refreshment in any form. His personal regret in this matter was shared by a number of elderly gentlemen, who feared the rheumatics and missed the meridian dram that was customary on these marine occasions. The vast majority of the company, especially the women and children, were on the other hand enchanted by the arrangements ; and shortly the saloon had something of the atmosphere of a nursery, with small girls in bulky dresses and small boys in kilts bouncing happily on the padded cushions, spilling crumbs on the new Axminster and screaming with delight in the novelty of the whole situation, while their mothers occasionally turned from the pleasures of gossip and a good hot cup of tea to admonish them with merely ritual severity.

Many of the males of the party had meanwhile drifted out of this all-too-domestic scene to congregate in groups in the sponsons, the alley-ways and round the rails of the engine-room ; for, unlike the females absorbed in their children and their gossip, they had perceived that the ship had cast off and was under way. For many of them, moreover, the engines were of the profoundest technical interest, and they crowded at the rails, staring at the plunging rods and gravely discussing the design and capacity of the machinery.

" Double diagonal compound, I see, Mr. Ballingall."

"Yes, Mr. Todd. Two fifty horse-power. Four Navy forced-draught boilers, I believe."

"She should do her seventeen at that, Mr. Ballingall."

"Aye, and perhaps a bit more, Mr. Todd."

There they stood, those grave men of a mechanically-minded race, and even the hats they wore formed a perfectly representative picture gallery of the period. This strange medley of high-crowned bowlers, square-topped felts, deerstalkers and cloth caps with monstrous ear-flaps, denoted a generation for which pleasure-making was not a specialised department of life but an occasional and still faintly regrettable departure from the normal. They had the look of men playing truant from office, warehouse or workshop.

Through this medley of people in such an odd environment there moved, smiling in the almost regal attitudes of patronage, hospitality and patience, a young couple singularly well favoured as to their looks. Mr. and Mrs. Julius Oliphant, as befitted the hosts of the day, were performing their duties with grace.

"Such a handsome young man!" the matrons confided to each other. "I declare I have never seen such a natural wave in any human hair. I wish our Elizabeth had some of it. She's very pretty, too."

"Yes, very pretty." This with more reserve. "Those clothes must have cost a fortune. They say she goes to London for them. But don't you think, Mrs. Thomson, that she's . . ." The voice dropped to a whisper. "Well, perhaps a bit near her time to be out on a day like this?"

The solid gentlemen were always to be seen in awkward coveys round the glowing figure of Flora. Against such a force of lush glamour their Scots dourness and caution were as defences of paper. Given that missing meridian dram, wit might have sparkled awhile in that improbable place. Instead, the grave men praised her husband for his enterprise in putting a steamer of such fine quality and elegant appointments into the competition for passenger traffic on the Firth.

"It was badly needed, Mrs. Oliphant," declared Mr. James Lambie of the Gryffe Chemical Works—"Stinky Jimmy" to half a county—with decision. "The riff-raff were fair spoiling the pleasures of a sail. You couldn't take a decent woman on the boats, much less a child, for the rowdiness and drink and the language. This is something that gives the better-class people a chance to keep to themselves. Yes, Mrs. Oliphant, your husband has got something here. I said, he's got something here."

When the ladies contrived to attract, entrap and surround young Julius the comments were, if a thought less judicial than Stinky Jimmy's, infinitely fuller of colour.

"I declare, Mr. Oliphant, I can't think to tell you how wonderful all this is! Such beautiful furnishings! And such perfect taste, too!"

"My wife helped me a lot, I must admit."

"Such a pretty young lady! You must be proud of her. But those brocades, the sweet lincrusta, and that wonderful cold table! For poor me it's just like being on my own private yacht."

"But that was my whole idea, Mrs. . . . madam. Why shouldn't the passenger have comfort and convenience if he is willing to pay a slightly higher fare?"

"Why not, indeed! But what a pity you aren't having better weather for the Opening Cruise."

"Oh, this won't last!" said Julius easily. "The captain says we should have a fine afternoon. See, it's clearing already."

"My goodness, we've started!" the lady would cry, her attention having been drawn to the seas scudding past. "And I never noticed!"

Remote on the bridge, sheeted and hooded anonymously in oilskins, two men conned the vessel on her passage down the Firth. Calum Bell, now by courtesy Captain Bell, paced the platform from port to starboard and back again, with only a word or question now and again to the quartermaster at the wheel. He was aware of a double burden, of responsibility for a new ship and her safety and of anxiety to see an idea justified, and on both accounts he cursed the weather that had come so thick off the Atlantic on this day of all summer days. But it would clear yet. The barometer in his little cabin under the bridge had ceased to fall. Now and again he had seen, or thought to see, beyond the islands that enclosed the inner Firth, one or two of those occasional gleams, faintly iridescent, which in that region of broken weather so tantalisingly hint at the lifting of gloom.

He was keeping his ship a trifle to the northward of mid-channel, clear of the lane of ocean-going ships on the one hand and of the flow of coastal traffic along the Highland shore on the other. When he saw himself with the white pillar of the Took Light abeam to starboard, however, he altered course to cross the latter stream and enter the great bay, an inland sea within an island sea, made by the innermost island where it lay to the mainland. Then his spirits rose with just such a leap as he might have seen in the column of mercury in the Fitzroy in the cabin below had he been there to study it. He was like a man who turns the corner out of a dark alleyway into a lighted street.

The rain was still falling, but it was the tâil-end of the storm passing away into the nor'-east, and it was shot with light. Beyond the rainbow curtain the slopes of the hills, wooded at their base and moss-green with young bracken above, were bright in clear, warm sunshine. The sun was picking out the white walls and blue slate roofs

of cottages and turning the sea a clean and sparkling green that had been a grey and dirty waste before. Calum felt in his throat the choke of excitement and relief and blessed that magic of western beauty which springs, not so much from grandeur of mass and charm of line, as from the infinite variations of colour almost from moment to moment.

Soon he was smiling a trifle sardonically to behold his precious passengers dare to emerge on deck. He smiled tolerantly to see and hear Julius professionally descant to those about him on the qualities of the vessel as viewed from the raised quarterdeck; after all, Julius was his friend and senior partner in the enterprise. Without Julius's money there would have been no *Heather Bell*. He was amused to catch snatches of conversation in which old gentlemen explained the lie of the land, thoroughly familiar to all but the infants among that riparian people, and the ladies suitably exclaimed as at the hitherto unseen wonders of the Golden Horn. And now—he chuckled to himself to think—all those queer, clumsy landlubbers were going to see something worth seeing.

While they eagerly debated which of three familiar routes he would be likely to follow, Calum altered course once more and took his ship into the mouth of a Highland loch, with the hills tumbling steep-to from great heights and no more than a shepherd's cottage, high and remote, at widely-spaced intervals along the rocky flanks of true mountains. Few of his passengers had ever been within this arm of the sea; and now the hubbub of explanation by the gentlemen and exclamation by the ladies rose again from the decks below, more audible than ever in the strange and resonant silence of this blind alley in which the Atlantic tides pressed unavailingly against one of their most easterly confines. Then, still with the triumphant feeling of one who stages a surprise, he checked his engines and took the steamer in a wide curve round a spit of rocks and into a bay of surprising charm: a sweet alcove of remoteness within the stern remoteness of the loch proper.

Now the guests cried out in delight and applause. Against a green curtain of small oak and hazel woodlands newly washed by the rains they saw lying against a derelict pier a steam yacht of beauty: as beautiful in its distinction of breeding as a fine hackney mare or a rare carnation.

These decent people had no eyes or thoughts for the whys and wherefores of the existence of a pier in this unlikely place; their confidence, born in them of their unquestioning belief in the inevitability of economic expansion, blinded them to the meaning of that remote jetty, built of cast-iron in the '50's by a Highland laird for the service of a mere shooting-lodge, and already, in the late

'80's, rusted and abandoned as an impossible luxury. They were of a generation still hopeful and unshaken, and the perfection of the yacht lying there against an emblem of feudal decay symbolised for almost all of them those ideals of commercial success and financial security they honestly entertained.

She was a lovely craft indeed: the last perfect expression of a technique that had matured to an art. This yacht, so dramatically posed for inspection and admiration against the green of a remote hillside, took even the inexpert eye with the impact of beauty, as it might have been of a drift of daffodils or of a white dove on a bough.

She was all white, with gilt scrolls at bow and stern and a bright emerald green along her length for a foot or more above the waterline. From the bowsprit pointing forward and slightly upwards from the fiddle bow the line of the deck was a sweet, low curve aft to the extreme point of the long counter, over which hung the folds of the Blue Ensign. The ship's two masts were slightly raked in pretty parallel to the yellow funnel. Spars and deckhouses were bright with new varnish, and the brass of ventilators and scuttles shone with much recent polishing. The more convivial of the gentlemen on board the paddle-steamer noted with approval that, under the striped awning that so picturesquely sheltered the yacht's quarter-deck, stewards in white jackets were busy about tables that (as could be seen even from a distance) carried a profusion of bottles of several interesting shapes with gold-foiled necks and coloured labels.

More anxious than ever on the bridge, laying his own ship against this white princess of the seas, from which not a flake of white paint must be chipped, not a particle of gilding displaced, Calum Bell was aware of the excitement among his passengers rising in a sort of buzz-chatter beneath his feet. He could imagine how the exchanges went.

"Such a *lovely* yacht, Mr. Oliphant! You must be *so* proud of her! I wish—but never mind what I wish. What name have you given her?"

"That's my wife's department. We're calling her the *Iolanthe*. Quite nice, I think. I wanted to call her the *Flora*, but *Iolanthe* sorts of suits her. She's very good at that sort of thing, my wife. She got the name for this steamer, *Heather Bell*."

"Is that the name? I never realised. The rain kept us all in the cabin—and you know what children are!—and we just didn't realise. You know what it is? *Heather Bell!* That's lovely. You're a lucky young gentleman, Mr. Oliphant, to have such a clever wife by your side."

Thus—and thus was the new P.S. *Heather Bell* laid alongside the new S.Y. *Iolanthe* by such an exercise of skill in ship-handling on Calum's part as only a few of the large party present could appreciate. Most of

the paddler's complement were infinitely more excited by the fact that they were about to have the fantastic privilege of boarding this floating palace of a private yacht and of being regally entertained by its owner, this fine-looking and agreeable young gentleman of means, Mr. Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant. The *Courier's* reporter, discerning the bottles on the tables, was already turning over in his mind such fine phrases as "the groaning board," "Lucullan repast" and "hospitality on a princely scale."

With a cool eye Calum watched the eager innocents pass across the gangway on to the scrubbed decks of the yacht. It lit up momentarily as the face of a dark girl, a calm, pale oval, was raised as if to ask a question of him. He shook his head and made with his hand a quick gesture of explanation. The girl, obviously unaccompanied, passed with the crowd under the awning.

3

Elizabeth Stirling by name, the young woman whose look had asked a silent question of Calum Bell on the bridge, was completely but by no means uncomfortably aware of her unimportance in that nearly fashionable gathering. Being decently and neatly, if inexpensively dressed to the limit of her means, she had little interest in comparing her sober clothes with the finery of young Mrs. Oliphant and her wealthy friends, and was thus without envy. She was indeed amusedly aware that her own acceptance of a back seat at this pageant conferred on her that advantage of the detached observer most of the well-to-do ladies lacked. Her only discomfort of mind arose from the knowledge that, Calum Bell's betrothed, his only personal guest on this great occasion in his career, she was nearly ignored by the Oliphant crowd.

Oh, yes! Young Julius—and she remembered him as a sullen too-good-looking stripling at Ardhallow not so long ago—had stopped before her on the way out, and shaken hands, and said something about the old days; but it had sounded hollow and uneasy in Betty Stirling's sharp ears. He had even stopped his young wife as she was passing and made the introduction; but Betty had seen the unfriendly eyes run up her person from toes to crown and had heard, as she had expected to hear, the undertones of a faint hostility, something more edgey than mere indifference, in the pretty girl's conventional phrases.

To a nicety she knew that this other young woman, born Flora Gillanders, did not and never would possess the bland poise of true aristocracy; also that the girl was acutely aware of that flaw in the otherwise splendid structure of her security. Not for nothing

had Betty Stirling herself been born the daughter of a small hill-farmer on the estate out of which the policies of Inverquey House had been carved by the golden knife, and not for nothing was she mistress of the little side-school at the cock of the road over the hill between Ardhallow and the railway station at Kinlochmaam. Every tradesman on his van was delighted to bring her the latest story from the Big House down-by, and travellers' tales ran faster even than the carriage-and-pair from Inverquey with Iron Jock, in a hurry to get to the city, scowling inside.

Betty found herself directed by a neatly-written card to a place on the outer side of one of two tables laid down on the *Iolanthe's* afterdeck. This was at right angles to the top table, which stood athwartships against the after-deckhouse and nearest (Betty reflected a little sourly) to the service pantry. She duly appreciated the fact that the captain's only guest had been placed at a safe distance from the seats of the mighty, and the practical side of her feminine mind considered the probability that the soup would be cold before a plate reached her, and that the good things would have to take a long, exhausting course from the top table downwards. It was draughty under the outer selvedges of the striped awning, and the greedy, skirling seagulls combined with the gusts of wind and the flapping of canvas to make a considerable distraction.

But it was all very funny when you looked at it coolly. Betty found herself delighting as in a good joke at the rich idiocy of her situation. She had discovered that her companion on the one hand was an unhappy-looking man with a long, red-nosed face and a protuberant Adam's-apple, and she gathered from his gloomy responses to her approaches that he was an agent or something of the sort in an Ayrshire seaport for such steamboat companies as that to which the *Heather Bell* belonged. "Oh, passengers and goods—all that sort of thing," he morosely explained his functions in answer to Betty's interested questions. He sucked his soup from the spoon with a great deal of noise. Her neighbour on the other hand was a jolly, wheezing red-faced man "in the plumbering line," as he put it himself, who frankly attributed his high spirits to the fact that, having been forewarned of the dry nature of the steamboat voyage, he had providentially armed himself with a large flask. This cheerful person, however, was more interested in an equally cheerful widow on his other side, and throughout the meal Betty's condition was largely that of a silent observer.

She was amused, but she was also troubled. She had read political economy at College, and her own emergence from a near-peasant environment had put upon her an acute awareness of the social gradations within the industrial society that was still developing on

the new wealth out of coal and iron. She considered the probable cost of this meal alone and, having ascertained from the gentleman in the plumbering line the approximate prices of the various alluring bottles—a subject on which he was prepared to expand—was appalled by its magnitude in her own scale of living. She thought of the upkeep of this lovely yacht, and though she knew little enough of these things, of crews and wages and coal and insurance, she reckoned with certainty that for his use of this toy in any one season young Julius Oliphant must pay the equivalent of ten times her schoolmarm's annual pittance.

It was amusing, but bitterly so. Betty recalled her father, that grave and upright man with the Roman face and austere side-whiskers who, ranking the libertarian poems of Robert Burns only second to Holy Writ, maintained at once an austere Radicalism and the native passion for independence. Out of the mountainy farm his real earnings could have been barely three pounds a week, but even so, and with the help of her bursary, she had been kept at the University for three long years. She thought of her mother, of the sweet, worn face, who had worked with her hands from dawn to sunset every day : who had not known a holiday all her life, not even a honeymoon, for—resting at last on her death-bed and sadly remembering the past—she had told her only daughter how she had tumbled from the marriage-bed at five o'clock of a summer morning to help her husband with the beasts. And between these dear, familiar faces out of the past Betty saw again the beautiful features of an angry man called Keir Hardie and heard him haranguing a students' club with passionate eloquence, bitterly throwing it in their faces that, amid so much industrial wealth and the alleged blessings of education, the Lanarkshire miner must contrive to live and rear a family on fourteen shillings a week.

Betty Stirling had little enough interest in the angry man's politics. The training which had favoured her understanding of these things had also given her the scholar's mildly pessimistic detachment. It was for her simply a pity that the facts of inequality and lack of imagination should exist. Her mind could leap in a flash the distance between this sunlit bay in the Highlands and a stinking close in the slums of Glasgow. But that woman, she who had been Flora Gillanders, could not and never would perform the incredible journey. She had never been suffered to see, and smell, the warrens off the High Street. She did not know poverty and the terror of it, nor the grinding burden of insecurity. For those rich by inheritance every chasm on the mortal journey was bridged by the power of money. . . . A good little metaphor that. . . . The winter rain battering at the high windows of old Synedoche's class-room. Rhetoric and English Literature. Why Rhetoric, which smacked more of Keir Hardie's oratory than of the structure of

language? . . . The rich passed over the crudities of life on golden bridges.

She was startled by a peremptory rapping of a knife-handle on the table and realised that her reverie had almost carried her over the borders of real sleep. Young Mr. Oliphant was on his feet, a foolscap sheet in his hand. He easily collected the attention of his guests with the shy smile on his flushed, handsome face.

"Ladies and gentlemen——"

Julius read his speech, but smoothly enough and clearly. The faint, lingering touch of the American nasal in his intonation helped to carry his words even to the outer regions where Betty sat with the flicking edges of the awning behind her, the gulls crying, and her neighbour in the plumbering line now sterterous of breath and frequently afflicted by a choking alcoholic cough. The gist of the oration was thus reported in next day's *Courier:*

> In his opening remarks the young preses of this distinguished gathering, rising postprandially, jocularly observed that on the outward voyage some, at least, of the company might have observed the absence of alcoholic refreshments from the menu of the matutinal snack and even found time to discover that the vessel was completely lacking in bar accommodation of any sort or kind. (Laughter.) That, Mr. Oliphant hastened to explain, was at the very root of the idea—he dared to say, the ideal—that had inspired him and his associates to put a paddler of such superior class as the *Heather Bell* into the passenger trade.
>
> It had long been his conviction, Mr. Oliphant proceeded, that the passenger trade on the Firth was in a fair way to be ruined for respectable folk by alcoholic excess and orgies of a kind over which he, the speaker, preferred to draw a veil

(This sentiment was greeted with a hoarse "Hear, hear!" by Betty's convivial neighbour.)

> The incomparable scenic beauties of their great waterway were for persons in all classes of society to enjoy in peace and comfort, and in such circumstances of decency that no lady need fear the necessity to blush for offended modesty or—and here Mr. Oliphant, amid laughter, said that he spoke as a father, albeit a young one—tremble for the unsullied innocence of the infant mind. (Loud Applause.)
>
> As for the standards of comfort offered by the owning company in the new P.S. *Heather Bell*, the speaker did not hesitate to claim that they were far in advance of anything offered hitherto in British waters and could stand comparison with anything in the

same line of enterprise in any part of the globe. It was his pleasure that day to welcome his friends and business associates on board his own private yacht, and while they could not all expect to be yacht-owners, it was his firm conviction that the ordinary passenger, paying a reasonable fare, was entitled to sail those matchless waters in full enjoyment of amenities comparable to those available to private persons more amply endowed with this world's goods

It was the sincere hope of himself and his associates, Mr. Oliphant concluded amidst a rising murmur of approval, that all his friends present to-day and, indeed, all the more respectable members of the general public, would come to regard the *Heather Bell* as their own private yacht. He could assure them that if their support were forthcoming, this fine new steamer would have an even finer and more luxurious sister, perhaps—who knew?—by the time the next sailing season came round.

With the storm of clapping hands, cutlery rapped on earthenware, and knife-handles pounded on the tops of trestle-tables beating in her ears, Betty Stirling wondered if she was angry or sick or only cynically amused. She had just witnessed the theft of Calum's ideas, even of Calum's words and phrases. She had to take it as passionately as that. For two years on end, whenever his ship was in dock and he could run down to spend an evening with her, walking the hillsides or sitting by the schoolhouse fire, she had listened with the patience of a woman in love to her beloved's tale of his plans and ambitions. It was all Calum's own, born of his devotion to the little ships and of his complete understanding of their function—the barring of the industrial curse of drink, the creation of something new in the likeness of a yacht or liner by means of smart uniforms, elegant furnishings, perfect cleanliness and service. She remembered how, in his enthusiasm and thoroughness, he would think of little things like the quality and colour of soap for the lavatories, the pattern to be woven into the table linen, the small refinements of a Ladies' Room.

"If I could only get the capital! Poor old Father left just about a thousand. 'I'd need . . . let me see——"

Now Julius Oliphant had met that need—and bought the idea for his own! No: one must be fair. Julius had been scrupulous enough. "I and my associates," he had phrased it carefully. But not a word of Calum Bell's most special part in the affair, not a word of Captain Bell, so anxious about his new ship that he had absented himself from the feast.

Iron Jock Gillanders had got up to speak, and was about to invite the company to see to the charging of their glasses and to drink with him to the success of the *Heather Bell* and her owners.

"They have got something here, ladies and gentlemen. They have produced something which, in my humble submission, fulfils the right requirements of enlightened commerce—the provision of an efficient public service with the prospect of a fair return to themselves. I congratulate my son-in-law, Mr. Julius Oliphant, and I would like to couple with his name that of his chief colleague, the master of the new vessel, Captain Calum Bell——"

"Hear, hear!" cried Julius, leading a round of applause.

Betty's heart warmed to Iron Jock, a hard man but just, and to Julius for the spontaneity of his response. She considered the too-beautiful face and the rippling fair hair. A pretty boy, and vulnerable among the hard, experienced men about him at the top table. He would never be guilty of a wilful betrayal. The shrewd, relentless eye of a woman jealous for another man's interests discerned in him, however, the pretty boy's facility for easy accommodation and feared the illusion of power that had come to him with the American fortune.

The slow beat of approaching paddles drew most of the company to the starboard rails to see the *Heather Bell* return to take them off again, and once more those good people, their enthusiasm renewed by food and wine, by gratitude and even a sense of co-partnery in a unique endeavour, found something to exclaim at.

It was clear, for one thing, that Calum Bell had employed the hour or two while they feasted by having the weather-beaten funnels of his ship repainted, so that her appearance had been given the last possible emphasis of newness. The graver gentlemen perceived for the first time that this vessel sat the water with a fine air of buoyancy, and gravely they analysed the factors that produced this pleasing effect. All that was nothing, however, to the fact that a band, hitherto unsuspected, was giving forth from the *Heather Bell's* saloon deck a loud and precise rendering of "Rule Britannia!"

This band of some fourteen performers stood in a rather solemn ring abaft the funnel casings as if communing in a tribal rite. Its members wore a uniform of blue serge with yellow facings, and peaked military caps. One double bass, one large silver instrument like a monster conch, and one harp provided the dispason of their performance; the melody and the fancy bits were supplied by a posse of cornets, piccolos and clarinets. The instrumentalists seemed to be either very young or rather old, and the majority of them wore spectacles, thick beyond the ordinary. The fact that they were foreigners impressed itself at once upon the island people.

"A band!" they cried happily. "What an idea! Lovely, I declare! Who on earth would have thought of it!"

"Yes," Julius might have been heard to explain patiently but proudly. "One of our ideas. They'll be on board all day throughout

the season, of course. Quite a new idea, I think. Oh, yes—Germans, in fact."

"Germans! Wonderful! How well they play! Trust the Germans for good music. This makes history!"

The originator of the last remark was perhaps not far from the truth. This band of patient Germans which Calum, through his shipping connections, had contrived to recruit from the Hamburg district were the forerunners of all the German Bands to escape from overcrowded Central Europe to the rich, expanding West. Before the *Heather Bell* reached Garvel the rumour ran confidently round the ship that all these earnest Teutons were escapees from the Continental horror of Conscription. When the leader, the first, loudest and most decisive of the cornettists, went round with a velvet bag soliciting the coins of approval, his reward was rich, even if the grey in his hair, the lines on his face, and the shagginess of his moustache suggested that he must have been a mature man at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

The band played the *Heather Bell* gallantly up the Firth. It was now a fresh, bright evening. The surface of the water was alive with the racing white combs of wave-crests flecking the pure blue. The steam-whistles of other, and even rival, ships spirted steam and sounded plangent salutes in honour of the new paddler, in her glory of fresh paint and speed, all her blossom of bunting and pomp of music. The westering sun shone on her new paint. Hundreds of pairs of longshore eyes studied her bearing appreciatively through spy-glasses and telescopes. Even cyclists on the road along the Highland shore heard with delight, and dismounted to listen, when the German Band passed from the "Blue Danube" to the "William Tell" Overture; from "Poet and Peasant" to "A Life on the Ocean Wave." The end of the Opening Cruise was triumphal, with Julius up on the bridge beside the captain, like an admiral waiting to take the salute.

When all the passengers had disembarked at Garvel, still loud in praise and gratitude to their host and hostess, Betty waited behind till Calum came down from the bridge. In the shelter of the deck saloon, now an untidy void, he took both her hands in his and grinned at her shyly.

"Was it a success, Betty?"

"A wonderful success, Calum, dear!" she cried, kissing him impulsively.

"So they were pleased?"

"Calum, lad, they were delighted! Everything you had thought of was new to them. You couldn't have imagined more enthusiasm."

"Did Julius make a good speech?"

"Yes." She hesitated a little. "Very clear and straightforward.

And old Mr. Gillanders paid you a very pretty compliment, Calum *mo chridhe*. Didn't your ears burn? But will you not be coming ashore? There's so much I have to tell you."

The freckled and still boyish face lost its grin and became the mask of inward concerns. Calum shook his head.

"There's so much I've got to do, dear," he said. "You can get your ship into trim, everything thought of, not a screw loose anywhere, or so you think, and then a trial trip like this finds out a dozen things that are all wrong."

"Couldn't Mr. Oliphant wait to give you a hand?" she asked with a flash of jealousy.

"Och, Julius has his own worries!" replied Calum easily. "Besides, he wouldn't know a thing about the worries the Chief and I have to sort out before to-morrow morning."

"Of course, you start your regular run to-morrow," admitted Betty sadly.

"That's just it. But I tell you what, sweetheart. On Saturday, as soon as I get the ship berthed, I'll get the evening boat for Ardhallow. *Then* we'll have our walk and our talk—and then we'll mebbe think a bit about ourselves."

"Dear Calum!"

They parted, and Betty walked alone along the quay to get the *Caliph* on her evening run for the Lochs. She felt tired, happy, worried and amused with herself and life all at once. It was a trying business for a girl, indeed, to be in love with a man possessed by an idea and an invulnerable sense of duty. She looked back once, but her sweetheart was not to be seen, and she could easily envisage him already absorbed with the Chief Engineer or the Purser in the exclusive affairs of his precious ship, the freckled forehead puckered by a frown. Her glance took in the house-flag of the new company, now stretched by a brisk evening wind at the foremast—a blue bell enclosed within a large red O. The accidental symbol of Calum's imprisonment within the ring of Oliphant capital irked her at intervals until, back at length in her remote schoolhouse, she fell asleep to the tinkle and chatter of a Highland burn refreshed by the morning's rain.

4

For the second time within three years of married life Flora Oliphant lay awaiting the onset of the pangs of childbirth; and she lay quite placid and unafraid. She was wholly engrossed in the tale of *Thelma* by Miss Corelli, which she thought lovely, and when from time to time she stretched out a hand to take a sweetmeat from

a box on the table beside her and pop it into her mouth, the action was automatic, unseeing.

There was no clinical reason why Flora should be in bed. Dr. Wedderspoon had given no order to that effect; no special arrangements for emergency had yet been made. It was largely that Flora liked being in bed with a good book, and liked also to hold her husband with her little pose of pretty, patient, trustful, faintly martyred motherhood. Dr. Wedderspoon had impatiently confided to the maternity nurse booked for the case that their patient was as healthy and lazy as an Ayrshire cow, and needed much less attention than many an undernourished woman at the other end of his practice. To Flora herself he had said, however:

"We'll see this through together, Mrs. Oliphant. A second birth should be easier than the first, and I know you'll be brave."

That was the right thing to say to Flora. She liked to be thought of as a brave little woman—a phrase that recurred in her copious reading of romantic fiction.

A knock at her door heralded the appearance in the great bedroom of a dark woman of about thirty in cap and apron over the pin-striped wrapper of a nursemaid.

"Is there anything you wish, madam?"

"No, thanks, Susan. Is Ambrose asleep?"

"As quiet as a lamb."

Ambrose was Flora's first-born, so christened after one of her transient heroes of fiction. Her father, Iron Jock, had thought poorly of the choice and had said so.

"Who's downstairs with Mr. Oliphant? I heard the bell going."

"There's Mr. Reid, and young Mr. Thorburn, and I didn't see who the third gentleman was. Is there anything else you will want to-night, madam?"

"I don't think so, Susan. Of course, I may have to ring for you any time now."

"Not to-night, madam, I'm sure. Anyhow, I'll be with you in a tick if——"

The woman called Susan quite unnecessarily flicked the heavy window-curtains closer together, surveyed the room with a stern professional eye for detail, moved to make up the fire in the open grate and, at the door again, dropped a little curtsey.

"I'll say good-night, then, madam. I hope you have a good night."

"I hope I shall, Susan. Good-night!"

Flora returned rapidly and gladly to the peradventures of Thelma. The evening was all as it should be, orderly and comfortable. As the pattern of their married life had evolved, each Saturday evening, such as this was, had become the personal property of Julius, so to

speak, the evening of the week on which he was free to have his own men friends in for billiards in the big room at the very top of the house, for drinks and smokes and the funny talk men went in for. Flora had come, with her inveterate passion for cosy classifications, to call it the Boys' Night, and she was apt to make some very arch and pretty play with the concept of herself as the Grass Widow in the flesh. Very well, however, did she like the break from routine, during which she could lie down with stays unloosed, and eat sweets without fear of comment, and await the hour until a willing male, fresh from the bottle and the company of other men, should come to bed with her.

This evening of all Saturday evenings seemed specially agreeable. The impulsive efforts of the child to escape from her womb were companionable. Flora enjoyed the subconscious assurance that nearly three feet of solid yellow sandstone stood between her and the asperities of the October night outside. This was her own house and home—Agincourt. She remembered choosing the name while she was, for a time, under the influence of feudal romance. Julius had been so pleased with her stroke of inspiration.

They had bought the house while it was still building, when Joe Manuel of the Sawmills had been brought down in the spectacular collapse of a Finnish lumber king's affairs; when Juley, so busy nowadays with the management of the new steamer, had required a home as well as an office in Garvel.

It stood high on the hill above the West End of the town, on a slope so steep indeed that the front lawns were sharply banked down to a high retaining wall along the topmost of Garvel's tree-lined streets, the latter so little used by traffic as to be almost a private avenue, and that the formation of a proper carriage drive from street to porch was a considerable feat of civil engineering. By both Julius and Flora it was considered a romantic circumstance that with the glasses or, better, with the telescope Julius had had installed in the bow window of the drawing-room upstairs, the baronial tower of Inverquey could be seen on clear days above the spine of the Ardhallow promontory, four miles away across the Firth.

"We could almost wave to Mama and Papa," Flora was apt to remark to her callers, who one and all thought this a very pretty conceit.

The affairs of Thelma progressed from crisis to crisis of life as imagined by a gifted spinster with a voluptuous imagination. Small coals dropped softly from the fire that heated to some seventy degrees Fahrenheit the great room with its massive pieces in mahogany—a wardrobe which could have stabled a sizeable pony, the marble-topped washhand-stand with its earthenware basins and ewers, the expansive bed that lightly bore the considerable mass of Flora herself. The

fishtail flames of the two lights Juley had so thoughtfully got put in by Dobbie the gasfitter for her convenience as, in another frequent phrase, " a great reader," hissed pleasantly and efficiently within their decorative bowls of glass.

All these circumstances of elegant comfort so ministered to Flora's animal appreciation of ease that within ten minutes of Susan's leaving the room she was asleep. The thick red covers of the novel rested grotesquely against the upper slope of her bodily burden, the place lost in a sheaf of resurgent, upstanding pages. Her pretty mouth fell slack and open, and she snored lightly.

Thus Julius surprised her nearly two hours later. He had drink taken, just so much as was known in their circle as " a skinful," neither too much in the gross sense nor yet by any means too little. The edge of his critical faculties was pleasantly blunted. He was profoundly touched to see his young wife lying there helpless, pregnant, vulnerable. She opened her eyes to blink and smile at him drowsily. He sat on the edge of the bed and fondled her curling hair.

" Dearie ! " she murmured, gratified.

" Sweetie ! " he replied.

" Thouldn't have left poor Flo tho long," she observed with the professional lisp she had fairly recently acquired. " Bad man ! "

" Business," Julius explained, mastering a belch with indifferent success. " Good business, too ! "

The word stirred some ancestral instinct in Flora, and she promptly ceased to be the pitiably expectant mother.

" What was that ? "

" Ah, you'd like to know, wouldn't you ? "

" Don't be silly, Julius."

" All right, sweetie. It was Ecky Thorburn with the *Heather Bell* accounts for the season. They're a bit complicated ; you wouldn't understand. But do you know how much profit she's made since she started sailing in June ? "

" No ! What ? "

" Guess."

" A thousand," hazarded the daughter of John Gillanders.

Julius laughed at her simplicity.

" A thousand ! *One* thousand ? Listen, sweetie-pet, and I'll whisper in your ear. Hold tight——"

He bent down, his breath warm and lickerish against her cheek, and muttered a word.

" No ! "

" Fact. Nearly paid for herself in four months."

" Julius ! "

" There it is," said the young shipowner, nearly hiccuping again

in his pride. "Of course, we put most of that back into the Capital Account."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't, pet. It means—Ecky Thorburn explained it all—it means we're going to get another boat built on this year's profits. Two boats. You see the idea? Always going on making money. Then three boats . . . a whole fleet of boats. Ecky Thorburn says we've got the ball at our feet."

"Another boat! That will be nice. What will we call her?"

"You're the one to choose the names, duckie. Any ideas?"

"I wonder," said Flora dreamily, carefully lowering her long eyelashes to lie over her cheek in that way he could never resist, "I wonder if *Thelma* would do?"

"*Thelma?*" said Julius, considering this serious proposition seriously. "It's a pretty name, but somehow, after *Heather Bell* . . . I'm not quite sure, dearie. More the—bell idea, if you understand."

"I know!" announced Flora brightly. "*Bluebell!* You know, Juley. The Scottish Bluebell: the Bluebell of Scotland. O where, tell me where . . . You know, Juley?"

"That's an idea!" approved Julius, now staring at the moulded ceiling in an ecstasy of poetry realised there and then. He turned over on his side to thank and congratulate his partner with a kiss. He murmured his admiration of her, his lips against her cheek.

"*Bluebell*! That's lovely. That's the very thing. Perfect! Then we could have——"

"*Silver Bell*," whispered Flora in the dedicated tone of one who deals in supramondane affairs and is inspired therein.

"Treasure!"

Julius buried his face in delight in the spread of his wife's hair; his cheek pressed against hers. Flora whispered insidiously into his ear:

"And if we have a little girlie this time . . . I think, I'm sure it's going to be a wee girlie. . . . We won't call her Thelma. We'll just call her Bluebell."

"Dearest! Our wee girl!"

5

For Calum Bell and Elizabeth Stirling that same Saturday night of October was clear, cool, and more than a little anxious in its burden of their exchanges.

From the going down of the sun in a dull red behind a bank of fog they had walked the upland roads and the hill-tracks about and above the schoolhouse of Maambeg. They had seen the night gather

in the glens, watched the stars come out above the banks of haze, and heard the great ships, feeling their way up the Firth to the anchorage, boom and bleat like great male babies for pilots and tugboats to take them home. The night train for distant Lochaber passed like a comet across the face of the hill above Kinlochmaam, seeming to leave them more remote than ever in their isolation. Whichever way they looked thereafter they could see only three soft lights, from the lamps in the farm-kitchens of Mamore, Colruan and Coul, marking a triangle of sheep pasture some four miles along each side.

It grew cold, and as the fog thickened over the sea, so did the stars grow brighter as the lovers saw them from the high ground. Fine ice on puddles in the tracks splintered under their feet. Each small stream gave forth from its gorge a sound as of fairy hammers beating on silver anvils.

" *Tha fuar*," said Betty at length in the Gaelic, shivering a little and adding in the musical English version of her native idiom : " It is cold. Come you home with me, Calum, and have a bit to eat."

" It is better out here with you," he replied. " You are warm enough in the crook of my arm surely. And happy ? "

" Happy ? No woman happier in the world this night ! But it's a fire a woman likes. Man, didn't you see when we were having a cup of tea, that I have a fowl boiling in the pot and a plate of broth waiting for you, my own kale and swedes and carrots in it ? The goodwife of Colruan sent me it by the lassie with the milk this morning, knowing you were coming—and her with a soft spot for a sailor."

Calum laughed comfortably.

" It sounds good," he said. " I can almost smell the broth from here. All the same, Bet, I think we should get married right away and be done with it."

" Be done with it ! " she mocked him cheerfully. " That's a nice way to talk to a young lady ! Come on, lad, and have your supper. Wise folk never make big decisions on empty stomachs or sleepless minds. You know, Calum dear," she added squeezing his arm, " that I'm as proud as a princess of the compliment you pay me. And there's the lowe of the fire through my kitchen window. Haste ye ! "

The schoolhouse of Maambeg was like many of its kind in the mountainy parts of the British island. A gaunt classroom in the pure School Board manner was but an annexe to a tidy, stone-built cottage for the decent accommodation of master or mistress and his or her family. The dwelling-house had at both back and front a fair piece of garden ground, the luxuriance of the cultivated soil in sharp contrast to the worn macadam, the shabby shed, and the broken-down drinking-well in cast iron at the scholars' end of the building.

Betty Stirling's pupils numbered a score off and on. Most were

dedicated to the high tops, as shepherds or shepherds' wives. They came to her each week-day morning during the term, fresh of face, solid, healthy, simple, friendly, half of them at least with the Gaelic on their tongues. Most would leave her at the official age of fourteen. Once in a lustrum a lad or girl of parts, such as she herself had been, would shine among the ruck of good-natured peasants, and she would do with the child what old Mr. Picken had done with her—coach it earnestly in Latin and mathematics, send it on to the Academy at Garvel across the water and, one day, read in the *Glasgow Herald* that a hope had been fulfilled by a place in the Bursary lists. Betty cherished in particular her pride in Davie Ferguson, the gamekeeper's son, third in the I.C.S. examination of his year. Coming to Maambeg as Daddy Picken's assistant, she had put a winter of work into this boy of the Scottish peasantry; and now—well, it was like having given birth to a noble son.

In that remote and uplifted parish, however, her need was to make a home for herself; and the little sitting-room in which she and Calum sat down to supper had been built for cosiness within thick sandstone walls. Betty had furnished it with the good deal table, dresser and chairs from her mother's kitchen, and these, scrubbed the colour of cream, made with little curtains of blue-and-white checked cotton a note of lightness and grace unusual in that age of solidity. The fire burned in a steel grate, elegant with the simplicity of good Carron craftsmanship. The lamp shed a deliciously soft light on the table and its furnishings.

"That," announced Calum, sighing and feeling in his jacket pocket for his pipe when the last plate had been pushed away, "is my idea of a feed. Look here, Bet! What about us two getting married right off the reel?"

He was quite astonished that his love should go off into peals of laughter at that, a flush of brightness on the face usually so pale and grave. He grinned at her happiness, though not quite certain of the cause of it.

"What's wrong with that?" he asked.

"Oh, my poor Calum!" she gasped, wiping her eyes. "What a way to make love! I give you a nice supper, and you call it a feed, and on the strength of the feed you decide I'd make quite a suitable wife! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! You're adorable sometimes."

"Och, Betty! I didn't mean it that way at all," he assured her earnestly. Then he grinned again. "I'll come round the table and kiss you till you can't breathe. But I'm serious. Here are the two of us, absolutely alone in the world, and you really lonely up here. I'm doing well; the ship's making money, real money. We've waited long enough. It would be daft to wait any longer."

Betty, her chin on her folded hands, seemed to consider the cruet. Her pale face was to him very sweet in its restored gravity.

"No, Calum," she announced at length. "Not just yet."

"Och, Betty——"

"Another year; just one more year," she promised him. "I want to be sure of something, quite sure. Oh, not about you and me, silly! That's the surest thing in the world. But you have just explained it yourself, dearest. All your savings are in the *Heather Bell*—and a good deal of mine, too. Now all your profits for this year are going into the building of the new boat. Wouldn't it be just sense to wait one year to make sure that the business is going to be a real success, not just the season's success of a novelty?"

"Mebbe," he agreed gloomily, "though I don't see what could go wrong."

"It's not within our control, unfortunately, Calum," she retorted mysteriously. "But come, lad, and help me with the dishes, and then I'll walk with you as far as Bannachra. You light your pipe now, like a good man, and remember there are not fifty years in our ages put together. I always want to sing when I think of that. You know the old song in the Gaelic:

Ma tha sinn gann de storas,
Cha'n eil sinn gann d'en ojge . . .

But if we lack for gear, love, we do not lack for youth. . . . No, no! Scrape all the bones and things on to one plate."

It was the easiest of her arts to persuade her sweetheart out of his occasional moods of gravity. Their evening together was happy and cheerful. They parted about nine at Bannachra, where the road started to dip from the moorland down towards Ardhallow. Betty had always insisted on this place of parting, knowing only too well the hurt both of them could suffer if, among a puritan people, the rumour spread over square miles of countryside that a man was seen slipping from her spinster home at all hours. She had no wish to immolate herself in defiance of a tradition sincerely maintained.

Betty Stirling was an equable young woman; and there was, she reflected with a smile, a bit of the puritan in herself. Calvinism, after all, was only tidiness systematised and raised to the *n*th power. . . . She smiled again to hear Calum whistling cheerily on his way home while she indulged her old sober-sided trick of slipping into metaphysics. The sitting-room was still warm with his presence when she got home again, still fragrant with his tobacco. And to think that, only a twelve-month hence or less, they would be lying in each other's arms in their naked bed!

CHAPTER IV

IN SOCIETY

I

" My DEAR HOST and hostess it would give me great pleasure if you would condescend to call me by my Christian name, which is Eustace, just as I should value your permission to call you Julius and Flora. We are cousins of a sort, after all, and my title is at once clumsy, a bore and an irrelevance."

" It might not be a bad idea," agreed Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant with an embarrassed little laugh.

" Yes, it's funny having to call a relative Lord Alderford," burst out Flora, pleased to the point of exaltation. " Do you know . . . Eustace . . . I've always been fearfully silly about that sort of thing ? I never could get to know when to say ' My Lord ' or ' Your Lordship ' or anything else."

" And now, Flora, the necessity is quite behind you," said Lord Alderford with a gentleness of irony that quite passed over the head of his enchanted hostess.

The speaker was a man apparently in his later fifties, of good looks that were at once gentle but firm, iron grey to near white in the hair, his slender, fairly tall and well-carried figure most agreeably attired for yachting in white calf shoes, white socks and flannels, a blue reefer jacket and a nautical cap. (Flora noted the littlest details of this flawless uniform and promised herself to improve on Julius's appearance.) The setting of the conversation was the after-deck of the steam yacht *Iolanthe*, steaming slowly in mid-Firth. The protagonists sat in deep basket-chairs, a table carrying the tea-things centrally placed among them. The delightful *al fresco* atmosphere of the occasion, on an afternoon of singular brilliance, was mitigated only by Flora's elaborate investment in layers of cushions, cloaks and wraps. She was not long free from the nursing of her second child, a little girl called Bluebell, and she was not one to conceal from the world the stigmata of a recent martyrdom.

The Fortnight was in full swing. After five days of scowling rain and spiteful gusts from the sou'-west, West Coast weather had performed one of its overnight miracles and, without abating its title to freshness, had suddenly decided to submit at least one day of blue sky and high white clouds that floated above mountain and island with even more

of majesty and lightness than any one of the hundreds of yachts, equipped out of the fabulous wealth of Victorian Britain, which scudded in droves over and around the countless square miles of estuarine seas on this great day of the K.Y.C. Regatta.

Whichever way you looked, whether aft over the elegant flanks of the *Iolanthe* or forward from the bridge, clouds of cream canvas sails against blue sea or green hillside delighted the eye. Eastwards, round the mouths of the lochs, you might see at once the yachts of five classes scudding on their various courses, excitingly angled to the wind : a flotilla seemingly as numerous as a great flock of gulls. Westward, among the islands, the raking masts and skyey canvas of the big cutters of a noble generation of yachts were nobly tilted against the horizon.

" Very sporting of H.R.H. to turn out to-day, I must say," observed Lord Alderford. " Of course, he always had a soft spot for the K.Y.C. —just because it refuses to be ' Royal,' I suppose. He's like that."

The implications of these casual remarks were of the most exciting import to Flora and only in a slightly less hectic degree to her husband also. To be able to listen to such intimate talk of Royalty was at least an approach to the charmed fringes of Court Circles, and who knew whither Cousin Eustace's influence might not lead ? The mere probability had been entrancing when it was first remoured in yachting circles ; the fact was stunning for many a decent woman besides Flora—that the Prince of Wales himself, bluff, bearded, cigar-smoking, had come North for the Fortnight and might, any day, himself take the wheel of that fine, stout, black-hulled yacht *Britannia*. Here it was a reality on this glorious day of the K.Y.C. Regatta, and it was almost as if you had been bidden to take tea with the dear Queen at Osborne. To do justice to the wives of the industrial magnates, their dream was mainly for the adored daughters who might yet be presented at Court, but could even a matron fail to tremble at the possible touch of a Prince's hand or refrain from rehearsing the curtsey before the long mirrors of monumental Victorian wardrobes ?

" Are you a member of the K.Y.C., Julius ? " asked Eustace casually.

" No. My club's the Royal Firth."

There it was ; poor Julius almost seemed to apologise for the commonplace though loyal epithet. Even the Kedge was still beyond him. This exclusive sodality rested entirely on industrial wealth in hundreds of thousands. It was little enough that membership was confined to fifty, with fifty guineas entry money and fifty guineas annual subscription, and, so the legend went, a capacity to keep above the table at the club dinners against the circulation of decanters and the provision of drinking-glasses so rounded on the bottom that they

could not be put down. The fact that irked Julius and affronted Flora was that old-established fortunes, founded a hundred years before, on weaving and cotton-spinning and shipbuilding and sugar-boiling, had created a new aristocracy and formed a close circle into which all the power of their own new wealth, and all the influence of Iron Jock Gillanders, could not force an entrance.

"*Britannia* seems to be in the lead at the Bell Buoy," remarked Lord Alderford, lowering from his eyes the glasses with which he had been surveying the lower reaches.

"Oh, isn't that lovely!" cried Flora. "I'd love the Prince to win!"

"So would we all, no doubt," smiled Eustace tolerantly. "This brisk wind suits *Britannia*, a remarkably fine heavy-weather boat. I'm glad I didn't miss this. I must say, Julius, that it's very civil of you to give me a passage to-day."

"But that's our pleasure, Eustace."

"And I'm so sorry poor Lady Alderford couldn't come!"

"She would be delighted, Flora, if you would call her Emmy."

"I declare I'd feel quite silly calling her that right away," asserted Flora. "She's Austrian, isn't she?"

"That is so," agreed Lord Alderford a thought curtly.

Many a bad hour had Flora endured before this agreeable situation developed satisfactorily. There the *Iolanthe* had laid with the rest of the fleet off Hamilton's Quay on the eve of the Fortnight: just one steam yacht among a score, to be sure, but not the smallest by any means, probably the newest, and almost certainly one of the most graceful of a fleet of beauties. There, a mile up the loch, moored behind her naval tender and separated by a wide expanse of empty water from the ruck, lay *Britannia*, insulated by a discreet but efficient police system from common contacts like a princess in her nursery.

It was perfectly tantalising for days on end. The royal cutter lay inert at her moorings while the equally precious craft of commoners turned out to make some sort of show on the first dirty days of the festival. Not a glimpse of the dear Prince was to be had. His movements were all behind the curtain that can be so efficiently drawn over the lighter moments of Royal life. A rumour ran around the fleet to the effect that Bertie was having a mighty fine time of it some fifteen miles inland at Sir Norman Scott-Muckersie's place. Over the drinks on wet nights the theme was embroidered. Somebody was said to have seen the prettier ladies of the *Dainty Lady Di* company, now playing in the city, come off the Sunday morning boat and then driven in closed carriages up the glen. Others, delightedly remembering Tranby Croft, reminded one another that Sir Norman was never away from Monte Carlo in the season.

It was on the second evening of the Fortnight that those on board the *Iolanthe* had seen a larger and finer steam yacht steal up through the mist from the open sea, two racing yachts in tow. The Chief Steward, to whom the whole international lore of the sport was as an open book, had promptly identified her as Lord Alderford's *Styria*, with his thirty-foot cutter *Emma* and little 19/24 *Fifina*, all probably delayed by the summer gale in the Irish Sea. "A rare sportsman, Lord Alderford," the Chief Steward had attested. "And well thought of in the Squadron." And when they looked again at the *Styria*, manœuvring to anchor, there indeed was the covetable White Ensign of the R.Y.S. hanging limp over her long counter.

"But Lord Alderford's a sort of cousin of yours, Juley!" Flora had cried. "He might have told us he was coming. I'm sure he'll know the Prince."

"Really, Flo!" Julius had protested, being already a little tired of the subject and now nettled by the implications of her speech. "The man couldn't be expected to know us from Adam. His grandfather and mine were only second cousins to begin with. I'm not going to throw myself at his head."

Julius spoke sullenly, and Flora pouted with annoyance.

"I don't see why we shouldn't leave cards on him," she said. "He might be very interested to meet us."

In the issue, Julius went ashore that night to the Clubhouse. His report on return was negative. The new arrival was indeed Lord Alderford's *Styria*, but only one of his stewards had been ashore to pick up the mail. Flora had in the meantime drafted a note to Lord Alderford, s.y. *Styria*. It had been patiently studied and revised in Julius's absence, and he could not withhold a grudging admiration for its dignified simplicity; and Flora was mistress of a beautiful Italian hand of write.

"Well, I don't suppose it will do any harm to send it across to-morrow morning."

The missive went in *Iolanthe's* four-oared gig next morning after breakfast and produced within the hour a gratifying response. This was brought over by a steam pinnace, as it were a dashing whelp of the mother ship, in a flurry of spray and consequence.

The writer—signing himself with curt magnificence "Alderford"—expressed his pleasure on hearing from Mr. and Mrs. Oliphant, of whose marriage and good fortune he had heard some time ago from friends in Scotland. ("What did I tell you?" cried Flora.) It would delight him to renew the family connection, which had after all begun, His Lordship liked to think, in connection with shipping matters in Garvel nearly a hundred years before. Unfortunately, Lady Alderford was unwell after the rough passage northwards from the Solent,

needed rest, and proposed to stay in bed for a day or two. If, however, to-morrow should turn out fine for the K.Y.C. Regatta, Lord Alderford would be actually gratified if Mr. and Mrs. Oliphant would put up with him for the day and allow him to follow the races in *Iolanthe*, while *Styria* remained at anchor for the comfort of Lady Alderford's ailing person.

So here they were, calling a real lord by his first name, and Flora immensely and justly proud of the firm and timely steps she had taken to establish a relationship poor old Juley might never have bothered about. Royalty was almost within reach. The Prince himself was over there, just a mile or two away, at the wheel of the stout black yacht.

" Couldn't we go down and follow the big race for a bit, Julius ? " she suggested.

" I think we might," Eustace backed her up. " They'll soon be coming up on the last leg now. *Britannia* still leads, so far as I can make it out."

The *Iolanthe* was thereupon headed down-river and, making a wide sweep in careful observance of the sanctity of the race, the skipper brought her up in the wake of a procession of steamers, big and little, which tailed after the racing giants. Distinguished among them was the *Heather Bell*, ablaze with bunting, the fresh paint gleaming on her funnels, her air of buoyancy matching that of the prettiest steam yacht beside her. To-day she wore, not the blue bell within the red O of her house-flag, but the even simpler burgee of the Kedge Yacht Club.

" Hullo ! " exclaimed Eustace as they came up beside her. " That's a smart craft the K.Y.C. have got for their Club Steamer to-day. She's new surely. What is she ? "

" You'll hardly believe it, Eustace," Flora burst out on a giggle, " but she belongs to us—at least to Julius ! "

Her feminine senses marked the sharpness of His Lordship's glance at her husband and the keenness of his interrogative " Oh ? "

" Flora's exaggerating a bit," supplied Julius, laughing uneasily. " It's a new company. I'm the chief shareholder and chairman, of course. It started with an idea two of us had . . ."

He sketched the commercial philosophy behind the appearance on the Firth of the *Heather Bell*—the passenger steamer as the poor man's yacht, the emphasis on comfort and elegance, the importance of the ban on drink. He did not, however, mention the fact that publicans in the district had already developed a healthy ancillary trade in the " Heather Bell Flask," conveniently fitting the hip-pockets of travellers.

" That's very interesting," said Eustace thoughtfully. " That's very interesting indeed. And you are developing ? "

" Oh, yes, steadily ! " said Julius in the large chairman's manner that was so comically ill matched with his good looks, his youth and

his palpable callowness. "But why not have a look at her? She's the Club Steamer again to-morrow for the Royal Firth day. We could leave our own ships behind and make a day of it in the *Heather Bell.*"

"And I could stay behind with Emmy!" Flora broke in gladly. "I'd love a quiet day. You know, Eustace, I haven't been awfully well lately!"

"I quite appreciate that, Flora. You certainly must look after yourself. But that's a good idea, Julius. I'd enjoy a day out in *Heather Bell.* A pretty name!"

"It was my choice," said Flora, rather defiantly.

"I congratulate you, Flora," Lord Alderford gallantly responded. "Now, let's see how the race is going. By jove! I believe *Bona* is weathering *Britannia.* Look! She's creeping up; she's getting that extra bit of wind round Knock Point. I say," he added gleefully, "H.R.H. won't be a bit pleased if he loses to-day."

"It would be horrible if he did!" asserted Flora. "I'm sure that when he's at the wheel himself . . ."

"At this moment, Flora," said Eustace with a bleak smile, "I'm fairly sure the wheel of *Britannia* is in—dare one say?—rather more experienced hands."

"Don't talk nonsense, Flora!" Julius added, curt, petulant and colouring.

The little explosion was blandly ignored by Lord Alderford, who promptly drew his host's attention to the fact that the skipper of *Iolanthe* (a sporting man from Strathlachlan, with a pound of his own on the outcome of the race) had taken the yacht out of the processional stream and put on speed, so that now they were abreast of the four great cutters tearing for the finishing line.

The afternoon breeze was still fresh; the raking masts lay over at a seemingly perilous angle, and the roods of spotless canvas, appearing to overlap dangerously like cards in a pack, were taut in their fullness. The long, curved bows of the boats seemed to be biting angrily into the seas like terriers in the ecstasy of the chase. They were as lovely ploughs throwing off white furrows; the glancing showers of spray made rainbows of the slanting light of the westering sun.

"*Bona* has it!" cried Eustace. "No, by God! . . . Your pardon, Flora . . . *Britannia* has it by a bowsprit! Look at *Valkyrie* holding on, the old warrior! What a race! What a finish! And—" he turned to his companions, his eyes shining—"so much pure beauty of movement and skill!"

"It's terribly nice," agreed Flora, but without any of his Lordship's passion. "And I *know* the Prince is going to win."

This prophecy, however inexpert and wishful, proved to be exact. As the eyes of the men were held by the terrible loveliness of the

yachts' headlong rush towards triumph or glorious failure, Flora's less concentrated attention was taken by a spirt of flame and a puff of smoke from the deck of the commodore yacht.

"That's it now," she said.

Her words were echoed by the crack from the commodore's little brass cannon. As for any doubts as to the winner, there were dispersed by the arrival across half a mile of water of the sounds of distant cheering, of a great tooting of steam whistles, and finally of the National Anthem as rendered by the *Heather Bell's* now famous German Band. A series of violent blasts on the *Iolanthe's* own whistle deafened the trio on the afterdeck and indicated that the skipper, Captain Murdo Galbraith, was richer by a golden sovereign if that first mate in *Styria*, though only a poor, ignorant Englishman, was the gentleman he professed to be.

Flora clapped her hands and cried, "The Prince! The Prince has won! Isn't that lovely?"

"Splendid! And a beautiful finish!" agreed Eustace.

"I'm glad we saw that," added Julius. "Now I think we might have a drink."

"A very sound idea, Julius," Lord Alderford approved. "Something long and cool, I think. Whisky-soda? No, gin if I may. A dash of lime, steward, and a tonic water off the ice if you have it. Thank you."

The drinks were served. The *Iolanthe* picked her way through the traffic towards her moorings.

"Very, very nice!" said Lord Alderford of his refreshment. "And now, Flora—dinner with us to-night as we agreed. Say half-past seven for sherry, dinner at eight; though I warn you that Emmy will somehow contrive to keep us waiting at least ten minutes."

"That won't bother me at all," Flora assured him.

"I'm sure it won't," agreed Lord Alderford. "And we sail in the *Heather Bell* to-morrow, Julius? Good. I look forward to that."

2

After his guests had departed near midnight on that great day of *Britannia's* win, the tall figure of Lord Alderford ranged the decks of his yacht awhile, finishing a cigar and enjoying the fresh air and the scene about him. He was deliciously aware of the nearness of other vessels, all packed like a shoal of fish in the little loch; of the warmth and assurance of their riding lights, with here and there a cabin window or the open door of a deckhouse making a friendly patch of yellow in the night; of the faint, silly sounds of revelry from bachelor parties

in the smaller boats; of the splash of oars; of drunken persons quarrelling comically on the Club jetty, their foolish insults floating with remarkable clarity across the water; of the half-light that never deserts the Scottish skies until Lammas comes with the gales; and of the incessant rustle of the tide along the ship's side.

All these sights, sounds and sensations ministered sweetly to the æsthetic instincts of Eustace Douglas Mark Wedderspoon Oliphant, third Baron Alderford of Alderford, in the County of Hampshire.

The moving waters in their priestlike task
Of pure ablution . . .

A sailor on watch, a decent, rough chap from Dumbarton, puffing covertly at his pipe in the lee of the bridge, was mystified to hear these words issue from between the lips of the Owner as he passed. The Old Man must be going clean gyte. If Sam Brunton's ears could have followed his lordship's mutterings and ejaculations down the after-deck, their owner might have been puzzled again by a loud chuckle and the clear enunciation of the word "Fantastic!"

It had been an amusing evening in Eustace's view. A connoisseur of situation, he had enjoyed studying the conflicts of misunderstanding and envy and downright antagonism produced by his own choice of guests—the two poor, little, rich provincials suddenly faced with phenomena like old Lady Bude with her racy and reckless tongue, Sir Peregrine Dobb-Potter, M.F.H., and young, silly Captain Lord Pitreavie of the Guards and his Cockney wife out of the chorus. The eccentricities of his own Emmy had delightfully complicated the social theorem.

The butt of the cigar curved like a falling star into the water. Eustace considered for a minute and with pleasure the monstrous looming shape of The Strone against the northern sky. Then he went below and knocked at the door of his wife's state-room.

But for a silken shift over the middle section of her slender body Emmy was in a state of nature. That was her way; she could prolong the process of getting to bed as deliberately and luxuriously as she did that of preparing herself for the social affairs of the day. Every sight of her renewed Eustace's youth, taking him back in spirit at least to the days when, a rich nobleman's son with musical tastes, he had let the scent of the Austrian lilacs go to his head like the wine of Tokay, fallen in love with a rising star of the Viennese light opera stage, and married her out of hand, to face ultimately a dreadful scene with John, the second Baron Alderford. (In due course the second Lord Alderford, growing old, flirted shamefully with his daughter-in-law and described her in a loud voice, in the politest drawing-rooms,

as " a damned fine bit of skirt," for he was rather a vulgar old party.) Her indifference to the British conventions sustained his private sense of the idiocy of artificial rank and degrees of nobility nowadays based so largely on wealth and industrial or political power. Her quality of artist, free and reckless and disrespectful, offset his own secret shame in having become, by virtue of inheritance, a man of large financial affairs. She was his dilletante, rebellious young manhood exquisitely embodied.

" My child, are you not cold ? " he teased her for her nearly naked condition, kissing the nape of her neck. " You are certainly in a scandalous state of undress."

" The cold I do not feel," said Lady Alderford. " What you call the undress—so English that !—is of great comfort to me after such an evening wit' so many stoopid people. And is that to be ashamed of at my age ? "

Lady Alderford drew attention to her left leg, stretching the limb out for his candid and scientific inspection. It was slender but shapely from white thigh to narrow ankle. Her upturned face was beautiful in his eyes : a long, thin, ivory-tinted face, with slanting dark eyes that bespoke a streak of the mysterious Magyar in her blood. And Emmy was into her fiftieth year, reflected Eustace wistfully.

" It is a charming leg, my dearest," he said gently. " It always has been."

" It is such a leg," declared Emmy, " as that Flora—what you call her ?—will not possess when she is only one-half of my age. That one grows fat."

" Little Mrs. Oliphant ? " laughed her husband. " What do you make of her ? "

" *Eine Närrin,*" said Emmy, but without venom.

" A fool ? Yes, but——"

" *Ach,* she is good, kind, *gemütlich* ! She is the provincial *Hausfrau.* She will have many children and grow fat as a turkey. Her prettiness will vanish in rolls of fat. She is nodding."

" She has ambitions."

" It is all the more laughable so. It is too late," Lady Alderford pronounced judgment on her sister. " The brain of that child, it is but *eine kleine Erbenschote*—what you say ? A little sack for the pea ? "

" Peapod ? "

" Peapod. And that is little. It is not given to all women to have brains, and yet many, by grace and art, make it seem so. But that Flora has no art. There is missing something—I do not know the word."

" A background ? A culture ? " mused Lord Alderford, tapping his wife's dressing-table with one of her hair-brushes.

"I do not know these words," said Emmy. "Your English language is as your English people—without edges. It is as the fog, the mist, the rain. One hour of sunlight, as to-day, and you cry 'Vot a lofely summer!' These English——"

"The young Oliphants are Scots, pure Scots, Emmy," Eustace corrected his wife maliciously.

"Is it not then vorse?" she cried. "Living in rain every day, and a God like *ein Polizift* watching always over the shoulder. Consider that young man, the husband of this Flora."

"Ah, yes! Julius. . . ."

"The face of an angel, so beautiful that even I have an agony here when I look at him!" And she touched her heart with the comb in her hand. "But then I talk wit' him, and what? Nodding! Oh, he talks, he is polite, he replies, but there is nodding—no ideas, no culture, no fun even. That will grow to be a very dull man, and soon."

"Perhaps a little social education," mused Lord Alderford. "I should warn you, Emmy, that they will be among our guests at Alderford for Cowes Week."

"*Lieber Gott!*" said Emmy, but without anger.

She jumped to her feet, pulled the slip off over her head and, by a sort of act of prestidigitation, invested herself in a very fetching nightdress of sprigged crepe-de-Chine.

"I am sorry for the little Oliphants," Lord Alderford continued thoughtfully. "They are the children of their environment. Their money is so new. Only two generations! Their grandfather and mine were cousins."

"And they are of the *Mittelstände*, the *bourgeoisie*, and they are dull. *Gott sei Dank!* Alderford is a large house, and I shall have some amusing friends to protect me."

"I have no doubt you will, my dearest," agreed Lord Alderford, smiling tolerantly.

3

Almost exactly twenty-four hours later the owner's state-room in the S.Y. *Iolanthe* was the scene of quite another marital exchange.

Flora Oliphant, born and bred a Scots Presbyterian, was no Continental hussy to receive her husband in a silken shift, display a trim leg, without warning emerge as naked as a trout from a brief chemise and, before the eyes of a man, invest herself casually in a diaphanous nightdress that only emphasised the allure of her body and was designed in the Rue de la Paix with precisely that intention. Flora was as hearty in love as any of her sisters, but the icy influence

of John Calvin of Geneva, still powerful in the grave, denied her even the private liberties. The very fact that she and Julius shared the same sleeping quarters dictated the voluminous, substantial though much-belaced dressing-gown and the nightdress that fastened to the neck.

The poor girl was still, in fact, considerably bemused after her day-long encounter with Emmy, the Lady Alderford : bemused but enchanted. She had been gravely scandalised to learn that Emmy insisted on a cabin, and at home a bedroom, of her own, saying blithely :

" A woman must have her sleep as much as any man. Has she not her moods, her—what you call it ?—her *douleurs des epôques* ? If her husband would make love, it is right that he should offer the proposal with grace and humility as when a young man in courtship. That enriches the experience ; that conserves the order of such affairs. Love is an art. It is all the more necessary to study the art, as one might study the singing of our beautiful German *Lieder*, in the state of marriage. You are young, *kleine* Flora. You are *hübsch*—pretty. Consider then the many years before you. Consider if, with much child-bearing, you will still be pretty at fifty and much beloved, as now, by your husband.

" There is a sense in these matters," Lady Alderford had concluded. " Order, intelligence—what you say ?—selection. . . . It is all the same. It is Art."

Flora understood with scandalised delight the drift, if not the detail, of this philosophy, but she would never have dreamed of reporting its gist. All she kept telling her husband was :

" The things she said ! I'd never dare to whisper them to my best friend. If she said things like that in my mother's drawing-room, I'm sure she'd be run out the house."

" That's these foreigners," said Julius.

" But she's nice, you know," Flora rallied to the defence. " She was *ever* so thoughtful of me, making me lie down in the afternoon, seeing that I was wrapped up and all that."

" I expect she wanted a rest herself," suggested Julius with a laugh.

" It wasn't that at all ! It was clothes. The clothes that woman has. Do you know, she changed three times to-day and kept me waiting *hours* every time ? Lovely things, too. She gets them all from Paris. I'd love to go to Paris. . . . I wonder if they'll ask us to Alderford ? "

" I'm pretty sure they will."

This simple statement, uttered with all Julius's new gravity of man of affairs, had on Flora such an effect as a cunning dramatist might have calculated. The hair-brush in her hand was arrested in mid-stroke. Her pretty little mouth opened.

"You really mean to say . . ." she said, giving every word its weight, her eyes beginning to shine.

"Just one or two things that were said to-day when we were in the *Heather Bell*," said Julius with a nice assumption of the casualness of power.

"What? Tell me, Julius! I'm dying to know. You've got me all tantalised and excited."

"Oh, it wasn't anything *definite*, you know. But Eustace said one or two things. . . . You've no idea how pleased he was with the *Heather Bell*. I had no idea myself he would be so interested. He went round every corner of the boat—into the galleys, down into the stokehold, up on the bridge; asking questions, wanting to know about everything."

"He's a terribly clever man. So nice, too."

"That's got nothing whatsoever to do with it!" said Julius rudely. With a little touch of the roughness that was developing in his private discourse with his wife he added: "Can't you get it into your head that Eustace is one of the biggest men in the railway business in this country? He's chairman of the London Scottish and Western to begin with."

"Fancy!" exclaimed Flora. "But what's that got to do with going to Alderford?"

"Oh, well! If you won't see it, you can't."

Flora began to sniff at that, but Julius ignored her distress and disciplined the poor girl with a bludgeon.

"Can't you see that the L.S. and W. will probably want to buy steamers? Don't they want to get their share of the new traffic, running their own steamers to meet their coast lines at Garvel and Kempock and St. Colm?"

"But you said Alderford," Flora wept.

"Of course I'm talking about Alderford! If you'd just let me finish. . . ." Julius realised that he was shouting now. He concluded more reasonably: "Eustace said that he'd like to discuss a bit of business with me. He said that we might find time to go down to Alderford for Cowes Week. He said he'd speak to Emmy. That's all I know."

The tears were swiftly wiped from Flora's eyes. These were gleaming with pleasure when she looked at her husband again.

"Alderford!" she intoned. "Cowes Week! Oh, wouldn't that be lovely, Julius?"

"It would be quite nice," he allowed. "But one thing annoyed me to-day!"

"What was that, dearie?"

"Calum Bell." Julius returned to his best chairman-of-directors

manner. "I don't know what came over him. D'you know, he'd hardly say a word to Eustace, grudged him every bit of information he wanted? Stiff as a poker, dashed nearly downright rude. I've a good notion to give him a piece of my mind the next time I see him."

"You should, Julius," Flora supported her husband earnestly. "Fancy him daring to be rude to Eustace! I suppose he's just jealous."

4

Alderford Old Manor, the reddening creepers on the grey walls somehow suggesting a ripe pear of ancient English strain, looked serenely across the Forest of Bere towards the mild chalky ridge of Portsdown.

It was the evening hour, that vague and still momentous break in the day's occupations when the house-party distributed themselves over the rooms of the rambling mansion and the broad acres of the enclosed grounds about it. Some unloosened whalebone corsets or stiff linen collars and sensibly lay down on the sofas in their rooms till the dressing bell should ring. One or two forceful males favoured the billiard-room and long drinks. An elderly lady, with the appearance of a witch but tolerantly accepted as a Russian countess with a tragic past, played a succession of the *Lieder ohne Worte* on the Erard concert grand in the great drawing-room: the pretty little melodies evoking a sweet nostalgia in those who heard them from a distance. Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant might have been seen frowning over an obviously difficult letter in the library. Lady Alderford was having a bath, contriving to smoke a Turkish cigarette while the major part of her person was submerged in some thirty inches of warm water, exquisitely scented with tinted salts. Her only child, the Hon. Mark Erich Eberhardt Oliphant, was passionately reciting Arthur O'Shaughnessy's piece about the music-makers and dreamers of dreams to the puzzled and faintly-alarmed daughter of a hunting squire who shared with him a canoe on the ornamental water before the house.

Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born the daughter of Iron Jock Gillanders, ironfounder in Glasgow, had sought out and settled into her favourite basket-chair in one of the bays of the terrace. A stout volume bound in red rested on her lap. Her attention had been drawn to the story-telling powers of Mr. Hall Caine, and this was his entrancing latest, *The Bondman*. It was "strong," she had decided after reading the critique in the *Glasgow Herald*, and Flora had a pleasing sense of being advanced and rather daring as she carried the volume about.

But it could not, this evening, hold her as against the interest of her own situation and the sheer charm of the English scene. Flora

had no sort of eye for the detail of landscape, but the flat pastures before her eyes, the innumerable elms drowsing in the evening light, the Norman towers and Gothic spires of churches standing equably over the green, lush weald did, in a subtle conjunction of atmospheric power, give her the sense of being abroad. She knew, without dreaming of phrasing it to herself, that she was in England of the English, a country quieter and slower and older and mellower by far than the urgent, melodramatic North of her birth. She felt in her rather lazy bones the relative softness of the air and on her skin a richer and more sustained warmth than she had ever known on the hottest days in Scotland.

In her capacity of sentient being, however, Flora was much more definitely aware of living for the time being in a social world, of which the exquisite strangeness matched in its quality of the alien the softness of the physical environment. They were so easy-going, as she phrased it to herself and occasionally Julius, those rich, titled English people. Sometimes they stood on ceremonies that she would have thought just silly if she had only read about them—passing the port from left to right with the dessert, and a grimace on Eustace's sensitive face when, on the first night, she had passed the decanter back to her neighbour on the right, who had finished his glass in a gulp ; dressing for dinner and coming down to meals according to an intricate system of signals by bell and gong ; having all your clothes, down to the most intimate things, taken and shaken and folded and washed and ironed and what-not by a maid. A valet, a terribly nice young boy, looked after Julius's things.

That had been one of the mistakes they made. They had travelled from Garvel to Alderford without body-servants, even looking after their own luggage. And the Alderfords, without raising an eyebrow or saying a single word, had provided them with the unobtrusive service proper to guests in a nobleman's great house. Flora's cheeks burned when she remembered, as she did frequently, that even the dim Russian countess had a maid called Florrie who sat high at the table, only two down from the Head Cook, in the Servants' Hall. She thought wistfully, and hopelessly, of setting up a Servants' Hall in Agincourt, knowing that her rough Scots girls would not for a moment stand on such ceremony.

An acute observer of such things, Flora saw clearly into the workings of this English system of domestic management on the large scale. It was a question of paying good money and of demanding the best of service in return. She even saw, though dimly, that the system rested on feudal assumptions untenable in her native land. True daughter of Iron Jock, she thought of the coal they must use, of the sheer volume of food coming into this house every day, of the

waste—the loaves thrown out to the poor or the pigs and the good things picked up by the estate servants and the villagers' children at the back door.

But now, lapped in the warmth of the English evening, thinking with a girl's happiness that she had still to put on for the first time a dinner gown the other women had not seen so far—a Princess dress in pale green bengaline flecked with gold, open all down the front in the most daring way, but over a wonderful underdress of rose crêpe de Chine—Flora reflected again that it was all terribly nice at Alderford at any time, for the good reason that those English people didn't seem to care a single bit what you did or said. If you wanted a bath at two o'clock of the afternoon—well, you just rang the bell and the maid arranged it. If you felt like a cup of tea at noon it would be forthcoming. It was all so smooth; and for Flora it was a puzzle insoluble that Emmy, the casual and elegant and explosive lady from Vienna, could contrive so much.

So easy.... That was the miracle of this English system. You took things for granted. You never asked questions. Not a soul that Flora could remember had asked her who she was or how she lived, and though this was the sort of topic that suited Flora's gifts, she had the wit to restrain her own numerous curiosities as to the background of most of the queer people Eustace and Emmy had assembled under their roof.

The awful thing was that this English trick of elision and assumption had her floundering hopelessly when the conversation was general, as at the dinner-table. They took so much for granted, these people, that most of their quick-glancing talk passed over her head and she could never see the jokes they laughed at. Flora was sure—and she was right—that she must often seem a proper fool among them. It disconcerted her to see that her own Julius was often in the same boat; but, then, Julius was so terribly handsome that he always looked distinguished and intelligent and hadn't a poor girl's fatal weakness of blushing at every slight or even fancied embarrassment; and he could keep his mouth shut. And these English of the upper class were so courteous and tolerant that they made it as easy for you as they could.

Deeply immersed in reflections of this kind, Flora was surprised and pleased to hear the pad of soft footsteps on the terrace and see her host, Lord Alderford, bear down upon her basket-chair. He came bare-headed, his iron-grey head gleaming in the sunlight. He was clad as yet in rubber-soled shoes and a loosely-fitting suit of blue flannel with chalk stripes. If she had seen Julius in such a suit Flora would have cried out as at a scarecrow, but on this elegant English gentleman of Scottish extraction the loose and easy garments somehow made a

picturesque pattern. It was those English again! By some miracle of deportment or assurance of sheer not-caring they could do anything they pleased. If Julius dared to wear such clothes in the front garden of Agincourt he would have every message boy in Garvel hooting with laughter and derision on the street outside.

Eustace approached her with that adorable smile on his handsome face. These Oliphants were all so good-looking beyond mere prettiness!

"Enjoying the evening, Flora?" he asked kindly.

"It's so pretty and so quiet," she replied.

"Yes," agreed Eustace.

He leaned against the balustrade of the terrace opposite her chair, but turned his head away to gaze over the weald.

"This is England," he said. "This is the real, old, settled, quiet, gentle England. You come to love it; it gets into your bones. One adores the grandeur of Scotland, admires the strong outlines and the sharp colours, but one rarely gets in Scotland what one gets here. . . . How shall I put it? . . . That sense of easy intimacy, of cosiness. Tell me, Flora," he turned to her with a smile, "tell me what you were thinking of just now."

"Oh, lots of things—things you wouldn't understand."

"I might," he coaxed her.

"Well, for one thing I was thinking about England—how different it is here. How differently you do things and arrange things. It's like being abroad."

"But that is what you are," he encouraged her.

Flora, reflected Eustace, was coming on. His sympathy was helping this muddled, sentimental girl-wife to clear her own mind. Suddenly she broke out in a confidence of illuminated observation and with a fluency her host had never suspected her of possessing.

"You see, Eustace, when I was sitting here," she explained, "I suddenly thought of Inverquey, my father's house. I thought I was sitting on the terrace there. It's just like this in a way, but it's really not the same at all. We've got statues sticking all over the place, and they'd look perfectly silly here. We've got lawns and flower-beds and the same old flowers every year——"

"Alyssum and lobelia, snapdragons and geraniums," Eustace supplied, laughing.

"——And you just let the grass go on growing, right down to the lake."

"Oh, we mow it once or twice a year!" her host demurred with a smile. "But you have been using your eyes, Flora, and you have put your finger on a difference, or rather, the signs of a difference."

"Why is it, then?"

"Why? Environment, climate, culture, tradition—choose any

word you like. If you are talking in terms of terraces, Alderford Old Manor and Inverquey, I suppose it's just that the English like to leave things much as they are and so create a natural tradition, while the Scots, being much newer at the game, can't leave things alone and have to borrow other people's ideas. I suppose the natural garden at Inverquey would consist of bracken and rushes and wild iris. . . . But we've hit on a subtle line of discussion, Flora, and I am tempted to be discursive."

Flora was not at all sure that she followed the drift of these observations. There passed before her inward eye a picture of Iron Jock Gillanders in the black lustre jacket of his holiday moments arguing angrily with MacWilliam the gardener, measuring out plots and drills with a tape, drawing up rigid garden plans on graph-paper and, in his lighter moments, painting the statues with a yellowish wash he favoured. You could never see Eustace bothering about that sort of thing.

"Would you like to live in England, Flora?"

"I'd love it!"

The suddenness of the question and the spontaneity of her reply frightened the girl once they were both uttered. Had she, in her notorious foolishness, committed Julius to an ambition that had perhaps never crossed his mind.

"Why not?" she was comforted to hear Eustace's gentle assurance. "Julius and I have discussed it once or twice. It's no business of mine; I have no great interest in influencing you one way or another. It's just that, as I happen to know, you can afford to do so. It's a pleasant sort of life. Julius may very well have a business career in London rather than in either Glasgow or Edinburgh. A nice little place in the Home Counties. Perhaps a bit of hunting, if you feel that way. A little flat in Town, or even just nice rooms in a good private hotel for the Season. I can recommend a delightful place in Albemarle Street. You've always got Inverquey for the shooting, the yacht for the Fortnight. Not that it's any business of mine, my dear, as I've said. But there goes the gong."

The boom of a padded hammer on a great plate of brass reverberated along the terrace, and the sound was symbolic of glory in Flora's enchanted mind. She started to gather up her wraps and book and work-bag.

"Let me take these, Flora," suggested Lord Alderford, proffering his arm.

They started off along the terrace towards the main door of the house together, to all appearances a decorous Victorian couple: the gracious, ageing host and his plump, pretty female guest.

"And while I remember, my dear," he was saying, "I'm stealing

your husband from you after dinner to-night. We have one little bit of business that will keep us rather late, I'm afraid, but you will always find us closeted in the library. My rapscallion son has undertaken to entertain you."

"Oh, Mark!" cried Flora gladly. "I like Mark. He teases me terribly, but I think he's nice."

"Nice?" repeated Lord Alderford. "Now, I wonder, Flora, if that is what you would call *le mote juste* as applied to Mark?"

The way those clever English people talked!

5

The equinox had brought high winds and stinging showers to the glen. Even within the high, stone walls of her garden Betty Stirling was anxious for the precious rows of green peas, for the rhubarb stalks and for the tall cornflowers she had contrived to rear in defiance of the upland gales and frosts. Outside the schoolhouse the tough grass on the slopes, flecked by tufts of cotton-grass and patched all too frequently with bracken, knuckled down to the whims of the wind in swift, rippling alternations of light and shade, as if a child's restless fingers were playing with the pile of a velvet cushion. The little stone building was beleagured by the gales, and a low ceiling of scudding cloud had sadly taken the colour out of the West Highland world even in the first week of August.

Betty tied a coloured scarf over her head and under her chin when she went out to meet Calum Bell; then the wind, whipping at her skirts, was so chill for the time of year she wished that she had put on a cloak, comic as it was to think of one buffet from a restless gust filling the garment and sending her flying into the rushes by the side of the track. She reflected that it would be a hard pull up the hill for Calum, and when at length she saw his figure come round the corner below Bannachra, an ant of homunculus on the narrow yellow tape of the track so far below, it was comically clear that her sailor, her beloved, laboured heavily against the slope and the wilful wind.

She rested against a gate at their usual meeting-place where the service-road from the steading of Bannachra met the main track over the hill. From here she could watch his approach over more than a mile of hard walking, and as she saw Calum coming nearer she knew that, on this day of all days, there was something wrong. She could never explain to herself afterwards what subtle sense allowed her that intuition. Perhaps it was what some people called telepathy; perhaps it was just her own loving and exact knowledge of all his moods and their corresponding physical attitudes. When at length he came

within hailing distance she certainly saw a man under a burden of concern, his smile a thought bleaker than a girl would hope for.

They were Scots, shy about the display of emotion, and acutely aware of the openness of their situation, but her strong fingers held tightly to his shoulders, and she lingered on her kiss.

"There is something troubling you, Calum?" she suggested gently. "Are you well, my dear?"

"Perfectly well," he assured her. "But something to trouble me? Yes, indeed! Come and I'll show you when we get home."

He always used that blessed word of her wind-beaten schoolhouse-home. Perhaps it was the finest word in the English tongue. His natural use of it pleased her. He was an adorably simple and direct man was Calum.

When they were together in the peace of Betty's sitting-room he drew two letters from his jacket pocket and handed them to her to read. The first, in the new typewriting, was a short and formal note from the Traffic Manager of the London, Scottish and Western Railway Company, giving notice to Captain Calum Bell of the P.S. *Heather Bell* that his appointment as Master of the vessel would terminate on September 30th, at the end of the current sailing season. A second paragraph, quite cordial in tone, begged the recipient to regard this notice as a formality, dictated by a change in the control of the owning company, of which he had no doubt been privately advised. The Traffic Manager dared to express the hope that Captain Bell would agree, on new conditions to be communicated to him shortly, to remain in the Company's service "and continue to skipper the vessel with the same loyalty and efficiency as you have so conspicuously displayed during two seasons of her service on the Firth."

The second letter was personal, from Julius to Calum. It sprawled, both literally and figuratively. Julius started pontifically by regretting on personal grounds the change, "of which you have no doubt been formally advised," but went on to speak largely of "family interests" and "larger developments," of "the current trend in traffic operations" and of his own "increasing responsibilities." In its later passages it turned almost pathetically to the offensive-defensive, charging Calum with his stubborn refusal to enter the Sunday trade and speaking of "differences of opinion" which, Julius dared to suggest, he was beginning to find "intolerable." He ended on a charitable note, hoping that Calum would either accept the excellent price offered by the L.S. and W. for his shares or leave them in the limited company and agree to continue as Master of the *Heather Bell* on terms which, Julius promised, would be "generous." Julius added that his cousin, Lord Alderford, was insistent on this point.

Calum watched Betty's intent face as she read the letters. He

also saw when she raised her eyes from them her smile was deliberately gallant and, in reality, wan.

"They arrived together," he said. "It makes you want to kill that little swine Julius."

"No," she demurred. "It just makes me sad. It makes me feel empty. As if honour and friendship were only sentimental illusions. Calum, he has stolen half your life from you!"

"Just as he clyped when we were caught in that smuggling business with Terry Slavin."

"It must be some dreadful weakness in him," said Betty slowly. "That prettiness of his! So much money coming to him when he was just a boy! He has felt the power of the money, and now he thinks he has found the glory."

"It's that far-out cousin of his, Lord Alderford! I knew in my bones what was going to happen when he crossed the poor old *Heather's* gangway. He's a smooth old rascal that, and clever; and Julius is only a selfish fool."

"Perhaps that is all about it."

Betty spoke without spirit, but her next question was eager, her grey eyes briskly challenging the brown of her sweetheart's.

"Will you take service with these people, Calum? Will you stay on in the *Heather Bell*?"

"Will I . . . ? I'm not a swearing man, Bet, but I'm damned if I will. I'll see them to hell first. I'll finish the season for them—that's only decent—but that's the end of me on the Firth. I'm going back to the Western Ocean and the big ships. It's rough, but a man's at least a man there. I'll work for my Master's ticket this winter. I'll . . ."

"And we'll come to life together, Calum *og*!" said Betty surprisingly. She dropped into her Gaelic idiom of affection. "Look at this now, will you? Dear! But we seem to be the right companions in misfortune."

She stepped over to the bureau in the corner of the room and turned back to lay before him another official letter, again in the new-fangled typewriting with the purple ink all smeared to the right in the copying.

This was from the Clerk to the School Board of the Landward District of Kinlochmaam and Kilbride, giving Miss Elizabeth Stirling formal notice to the effect that the side-school at Maambeg would not be reopened as usual at the beginning of the September term. The Clerk was good enough to provide Miss Stirling with the statistical information that, while the number of pupils on her roll at the end of the last term was seventeen, his officers had ascertained that only five would present themselves in the autumn. It had therefore been

determined that the children from Maambeg should thenceforth attend the Public School at Kinlochmaam, and the Clerk had pleasure in adding that his Board proposed to appoint Miss Stirling to the full charge of the Infant Department of that institution at a salary of £10 in excess of that which she received at present, *plus* £10 *per annum* as Maintenance or Travel Allowance. He added his Board's appreciation of Miss Stirling's meritorious services at Maambeg, trusted she would see her way to accept the proffered new appointment, and concluded with a friendly note on the melancholy but evidently uncontrollable trend of rural depopulation.

Betty smiled to watch Calum's expression as he read the letter. That round, freckled face of a true man could look so stricken in a wholly boyish way. The brown eyes he turned to her were wide with concern.

"This is a nice day!" he said gloomily. "That's both of us out of a job."

"But I'm not out of a job!" Betty returned with a laugh. "Indeed, dear, they want to promote me."

"Yes, but you, and Maambeg——"

"Ah, Maambeg!" she agreed. "So much of my life and my work —and our sweethearting. . . . But, Calum! We've got to be very practical now. No! Kissing won't solve it—though I like it! We have to *think*. First of all, that you and I are not out of our jobs. Then, that we can go on, but only on conditions other folk make for us. There's the rub for simple, independent people like you and me. And then no children left on the hills for me to teach! It's a bonnie syllogism, as Professor Robb used to say in his Buchan accent. . . . Come on, Calum! We'll have a bite to eat, at least. Do you smell that fine bit of hill mutton roasting? You have to scrape the potatoes and shell the peas."

Their concern was not to be ignored, however. It hung over their meal together and took the heart out of all Betty's attempts at gaiety. It dogged them desultorily throughout their afternoon walk, and it faced them even when, after a long climb, they came out on the plateau on the summit of Ben Soull. For there, commanding a great view of mountain and tidal water for many miles around about, what should they see making her way up the Firth from the ocean, for all the world like a bottled toy at this distance, but the liner *City of Madrid*, black funnels, square-rigged masts, and the lines of a yacht.

"There she is, the old lady!" exclaimed Calum, but morosely. "And six months from now I'll mebbe be keeping the midnight watch on her bridge, and the Western Ocean coming over the foc's'le-head like Niagara."

Betty's reply was indirect. Her eyes were not on the scenery but on the cushion of blaeberries that was their seat.

"I suppose, Calum," she asked, "that you can get your money, and that little bit of mine, back out of the railway company?"

"Our money back? Yes. Julius mentions that in the letter. They'll pay twenty-five shillings for every pound share, and I suppose that bit of it's fair enough. Why do you want to know?"

"Wait till I do a sum. It's a profit of twenty-five per cent, at least. A quarter of fifteen hundred is . . . Och, it's plenty of money for you and me, Calum!" she suddenly laughed. "You'll just write to-night and tell those railway folk that we're not playing, and that we'll have our money back when they have made up the accounts."

"Wait a minute, Betty——".

"Can a girl not count up her dowry?" she teased him while she blushed. "I've got a good use for their money, a better use than keeping Julius Oliphant in cigars and his wife in Paris hats."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Calum said in that blunt way which was one of his charms for her. The honest brown eyes were trustful but puzzled.

"Listen, lad!" she said, laying her hand on his, the white one over the brown. "We are together now and alone, as if there was nobody at all in all this world to care for either of us; and that's the truth of it. When you showed me those letters to-day I felt like an orphan in a bad reformatory. . . . No, no, dear! A moment And then, when we were coming up the hill, I began to feel happy again; I began to be happy and proud about the fact, the truth. That is: just you and I. Love, pride, trust—put any word to it you like. What more on earth could we want? And since I'm a Scotswoman, and a Highland woman at that, I'm not forgetting the tocher! Then, when we get married in September, or October——"

Calum was listening carefully, as ever, to his articulate self. Betty was always a great one for a swiftness of thought and expression beyond his powers. He was a man to take his bearings with a seamanlike and mathematical deliberation. He interrupted her now.

"But you haven't said anything about your job. They offered you a new job. That was a decent letter you had from the School Board."

"Man, Calum!" she chaffed him happily. "You'd think you were reading a chart and the Sailing Directions for a creek in Labrador! I made up my mind about the school long ago. I knew Maambeg was bound to be closed sooner or later. I have got another notion altogether, and that's why I'm thinking about the money. It has been in my mind for years."

"But you said we were going to be married."

"Of course, I did! But . . . Calum, will you be sensible for one moment? You have my lips sore with those kisses of yours. . . . Now, listen——"

6

Flora had seen the Prince! His Royal Highness had even then taken on the all too solid flesh of his maturity, but for the little provincial lady he was still as a knight in armour, the hero of a girl's dream. The steam pinnace that took H.R.H. out to *Britannia* had swept close round the stern of s.y. *Styria*, and she had seen him: beard, cigar and all. More than that—so much more than that!—she had waved a handkerchief franctically and, as he passed all too swiftly, believe it or not, the Prince had raised a bulky hand to the peak of the famous yachting cap in acknowledgment of her loyalty.

All the circumstances of the day, indeed, had accorded with her romantic fancy. Julius and Eustace were in London finishing their business. Emmy was in one of her languid moods, and only a handful of the younger members of the house-party, with the Honourable Mark acting host according to his eccentric lights, had gone to Cowes. These younger companions had paired off nicely, each romantic couple in its chosen alcove on the decks of the *Styria*, and Flora had had Mark all to herself.

The things that boy said! And he was so strikingly attractive in his wild way! He flirted with her shamelessly, and he teased her, and before they started to drive back to Alderford in the late afternoon he had the poor lady in an ecstasy of girlish pleasure and matronly apprehension, her delight tempered a little by the lurking suspicion that she was having (and she blushed even to think of the vulgar phrase) her leg pulled.

Dinner that evening was almost a gala affair, the slightly casual atmosphere of Emmy's table formalised a little to celebrate the conclusion of the steamboat business, Julius's appointment as a director of the London, Scottish and Western, and the breaking-up of the party. Though she warmly remembered her babies in distant Scotland, Flora was sad that she must leave this scene of ease, grace and romance. She had been living for ten days in one of her own novelettes, and to have to go back even to the solid comforts of Agincourt and the possessive intimacies of the nursery was like facing arctic desolation after a sojourn in Mediterranean sunlight. Ah! but Julius might still decide to move South. They sometimes talked of it in their bedroom at night; she ever so careful not to appear over-eager,

he ponderously undecided. This night, specially to please him, she had put on the dinner dress that he always noticed and approved—heliotrope bengaline with jewelled insertions.

There was a toast or two, but without speeches. Eustace gave the new director of the London, Scottish and Western, and an unwonted flash of intuition inspired Julius to propose "The London, Scottish and Western Fleet—and may it prosper!" An elderly baronet, a newcomer for the evening and clearly of convivial habits, raised his glass in a shaking hand and in a raucous but gallant voice toasted, "The best of them all, the Rose of Austria, our charming hostess! Lady Alderford—my compliments."

When the little buzz of conventional approval died away, the Honourable Mark spoke in a tired but clear voice.

"This is a most lamentable display of feudal emotion and capitalistic arrogance," he said.

His father laughed at his favourite's mischievous, undergraduate pose, but a little uneasily.

"Your political feelings are ruffled, Mark?" he asked. "But I'd let them sleep for this one night of relaxation."

The social sense of the English hurried to ignore the faint hint of asperity in these exchanges, and a tattle of general conversation rose to conceal the spectre of embarrassment. Mark was left to work his mischief among a small group at Emmy's end of the long table. Flora sat farther up but opposite him, and she detached herself from her neighbours to listen when she heard him turn his mockery on Julius.

Mark seemed excited. His eyes were bright, his hair wild, and she thought that he must have had a glass of wine too much.

"And they have made a merchant prince of you, Julius?" she heard him say with an edge on his laugh. "And I suppose thousands of poor fools in the slums will have to pay for it."

"I don't think anything of the sort," retorted Julius stoutly, but his Scots voice sounded strangely flat and sullen. "Investment makes employment."

"The very voice of my father and his sainted colleagues!" cried Mark with delight. "You will make a splendid Provost or Bailie—if I have the terms right—when the time comes, Julius. You will have all the proper phrases."

"I happen to mean what I say," said Julius.

Flora trembled to see the warning signs. She had just enough shrewdness to know that if Julius had but the slightest gift of frothy repartee, Mark would leave him alone. Mark was only showing off. But Julius had no lightness of mind or tongue. She could not have seen his face without leaning forward to look at it, but she knew

that it would be flushed and petulant, a scowl wiping out its beauty.

"Oh come, Julius!" Mark chaffed this all-too-easy victim. "An alderman at—what?—twenty-three, twenty-four! Even the guinea-pig has its lighter moments."

"Guinea-pig? What is that?" Emmy intervened sharply. "That has the sound of rudeness, Mark."

"Oh, no, no!" Mark protested hastily. "The term is merely conventional in the City. Believe me, Julius, if you are offended I am sorry, and I apologise. *Liebe Mutter*, 'guinea-pig' is *das meerschweinchen* in German, and it is purely technical in English slang. It applies in the City to a man of means who, though he may not have the slightest knowledge of a given trade or profession, is appointed director of a company engaged in that trade, simply because his money is useful for the purposes of expansion. I take it that that is precisely Julius's position in the L.S. and W. Otherwise, I repeat my apology, withdraw as gracefully as possible, and proceed to adorn myself in sackcloth and ashes."

It was said graciously enough, and still it was rude. Mark could never keep out of his speech those undergraduate overtones of superiority; it was a necessity for him to retain the position of patronage. Emmy frowned and drained her glass of Evian water.

"The locution is interesting, Mark," she said. On Julius she deliberately turned her most enchanting smile. "My son plays with words and likes the sound of his own voice."

"Oh, I don't mind!" Julius contrived to laugh. Another flash of wit came on a freshet of alcohol to his assistance: "I say that money talks the most sense."

"Jolly good, Julius! I say, old boy, I wish I had said that myself!"

The applause came genuinely from Mark. He beamed on his butt, wondering gleefully if this dull and distant cousin might gloriously turn out to be a Scottish edition of the fabulous Oscar. That chap Barrie had already proved subtle enough to impress young Oxford. But when Emmy, Lady Alderford, had collected the attention of her female guests and bidden them to rise with a lift of her eyebrows, Flora saw that Julius was still angry and congested with resentment. She knew how he felt and how he would maintain his attitude. Cross Julius, and it took hours, even days sometimes, to get him out of the huff into which he invariably retired.

When the ladies were all in the drawing-room, Flora found herself beckoned to her hostess's side. There, without knowing it, she was kept amused, flattered and soothed until the asperities at the dinner table had lost their edge and her sanguine spirits were high again. They were joined by the gentlemen, splendid in their bulging shirt-fronts, drooping moustaches and even imperials. Mark crossed

direct to where his mother sat with Flora and bowed correctly.

"Father's compliments, *liebes Mütterchen*, but he and Julius and their colleagues have still some business to discuss. They will be in the library for another hour probably. No doubt," Mark added with a grin, "they will think of several new and better ways of swindling the public."

Emmy laughed and rapped him over the knuckles with the edge of her Condor fan.

"You are a maker of mischief, Mark, a *saboteur*," she turned to Flora, laughing again. "Never, never, Flora, let this rascal of mine persuade you that he is serious in what he says. And now, Mark, will you be so good as to play for us?"

"If you mean by 'us' this rabble of plutocrats, leavened with a few decaying aristocrats, the answer, *liebe Mutter*, is No," declared Mark. "If you mean your gracious self and *gnädige Frau* Oliphant, then—yes. In fact, I shall play for Flora alone on her last night with us."

He turned on Flora the intent gaze of his dark eyes, brooding and questioning. Its deliberate intensity of individual appeal set the girl blushing and her heart thumping, as if an approach to seduction itself had been implied in the exchange.

"That is a pretty compliment," said Emmy. "I shall listen with pleasure."

Her hand on Mark's arm, Flora was led among the occasional chairs and recurrent groups of conversationalists on the floor of the great drawing-room to where the Erard concert grand stood in an alcove. Mark handed her with grace to a seat on a low chair close against the piano stool and close against the wall, so that he sat between her and the throng of guests.

"What shall I play for you, Flora?" he seemed to whisper.

"What about the other guests?" she suggested.

"They will listen for about ninety seconds and then proceed to make the place more like a monkey-house than ever. This is just for you."

He started to improvise gently, the damper down, and a few people near them turned with polite and expectant smiles towards the piano. Mark continued to improvise with an occasional deliberate discord, and the faces turned away to resume the absorbing pursuit of self-expression through conversation.

"I like Raff's *Cavatina*," suggested Flora tentatively.

"Good God!" was Mark's abrupt return. "No! I'll play you something better than that. You deserve something better than that." And he turned to smile on her confidentially. "Listen to this. Listen to Chopin making love to you."

He modulated adroitly into the middle part of the Polonaise in C Sharp Minor, ignoring the composer's signs and sentimentalising both pace and melody ; and Flora was enchanted, marvelling that such a clever and explosive boy as Mark could use long, white, precise fingers to make magic with melody. She closed her eyes to listen, and it was better than reading the loveliest novel she had ever read.

There is that in music which no other art possesses : the power to move simple hearts through its most sophisticated expressions and the power to express profundities through its simplest applications. Thus Mark played on and at the girl through the great classical melodists from Chopin to Schubert, Liszt, Verdi and Schumann. When he came to *Du bist wie eine Blume* he sang the words in the soft Austrian accent learned from his mother, but so lightly that only Flora heard them.

As fully and genuinely as ever in her life before and after the daughter of Iron Jock Gillanders enjoyed in that hour a pure æsthetic experience. Melody, often subtle enough, took her very ordinary little self into an air pure and serene. The absolute values of great music could never have touched her, but insofar as she could be profoundly moved within a personal relationship, Mark's playing so moved her. She floated with her love in a gondola on Venetian canals ; she trod the spring-green grass of upland pastures, high of heart and pure in mind. She was the pretty shepherdess tending the innocent lambs ; she was also the lovely virgin robbed of a man's love by a scheming rival from the base world, but always poised, proud and reticent.

Flora was in fact in a sort of religious trance when Mark ceased playing and the drumming of the last chord died away, as in a forest, in the belly of the great piano.

" That's all," he said curtly.

" It was beautiful, Mark," she said. " Thank you very much."

He looked tired, sad and romantic. A little gesture, quite unstudied, had put his elbows on the wooden edge of the keyboard ; his white fingers ploughed his vagrant, dark hair.

" While you were playing," she continued, " I was watching the moon rising. It was all just perfect."

" Ah, the moon ! Full to-night."

Mark swung round on the stool and stared into the silvern stillness outside. He turned back to Flora with an intimate smile.

" Have you ever been on the roof? " he asked. " Did Father never show off his pet possession ? It's lovely up there at any time. To-night it will be perfect. Come and I'll show you the way. A little picture to take home with you."

" I'll need a wrap."

" We'll pop in the main door. The stair starts from the floor just above your room. I'll wait for you."

All unthinking, she followed him through the high French windows that had been fitted into the gracious Jacobean oriel, along the terrace, and into the quiet of the hall. They passed the door of the library, hearing the rumble of men's voices within, and Mark grinned at her confidentially. It was pleasantly conspiratorial, as in a boy-and-girl escapade, to slip into her bedroom, choose an evening cloak in black velvet with a pink satin lining, and then follow Mark up a series of narrow stairs on to the leaden levels of the roof.

"I'm going to be giddy, I'm sure!" cried Flora.

"You just imagine you are," remarked her companion firmly, not to say harshly. His fingers closed round her wrist. They were strong and cool. "Look! The parapet is almost up to your shoulders. Say another word, and I'll jump up and do an acrobatic act along the top."

"Oh, don't! I couldn't bear that."

"Couldn't you, now?" he teased her cynically. Again his dark eyes engaged hers directly. "All that concern for the sake of Cousin Mark? I don't believe it."

"It's not you at all!" cried Flora indignantly.

"Good!" said Mark softly. "Now we know where we are. But come and look over the weald. If you feel uneasy, let me offer you a cousinly arm. Look, there's another broad ledge below us. You're not on the edge of perdition just yet."

"I'll be all right, I think, thank you, Mark."

"Then look—look at England going to sleep!"

There was still something of daylight in the sky, but the August moon was up in full above the Downs, and the two lights, fusing, made magic over the settled landscape. The clumps of elms were mysterious balls of smoke in that late dusk. There was a haze of cottage smoke and evening mist over the fields, and through it the steady, yellow lights of peasant lamps gleamed comfortably. The square Norman tower on the parish church of Alderford village alone stood out clear against the dull lemon of the sky where the sun had set. The rest was a dream, a brooding, a coma of fertile contentment.

Flora and Mark stood close together and silent for a long time, content to consider according to their individual lights the beauty of the English scene or the interest of the position they shared.

"We should be going back to the drawing-room, Mark," Flora whispered at length.

"A drawing-room! And all the poetry of England at our feet!" murmured Mark. He waved his hand in a sweep round the horizon. "That's where the English get their poetry, Flora. Soft stillness and the night. . . . Leaving the world to darkness and to me. . . . You could make a fat anthology out of the verses suggested by just such a

scene as this. The English—and I'm an Austrian—begin and end their æsthetic lives in terms of landscape. The evening mists over the green fields are always in their minds. And, Lord !—just look at it !—they have something to dream about."

"It's terribly nice," said Flora.

"*Gott im Himmel !*

Mark turned on her, and she was afraid of the look on his dark face.

"For the dear Lord's sake, Flora !" he spoke rapidly and angrily. "Can't you find a word or a phrase of your own? I took you to Chichester Cathedral the other day, showed you one of the Gothic glories of Europe, let you hear a service which, whatever you may feel about organised religion, is of the very guts of the English tradition —and it was only 'terribly nice !'" He seemed to spit the words, at her. "Now I show you the perfection of English landscape loveliness, at the perfect hour of the perfect month of the year, and it's 'terribly nice !' I suppose that when you meet your God you'll remark to him that Heaven is 'terribly nice !'"

"I didn't come up here to be insulted !"

"No," said Mark drearily. "You came up here to be enchanted. And now——"

His sadness, feigned or not, touched her soft heart. The fall of unkempt hair on the boy's forehead affected her deeply somehow.

"But I love it all, Mark !" she relented and half-pleaded. "I liked the Cathedral and the service, and I love this view. You needn't be so rude about it."

"She said 'love,'" Mark appeared to address the moon. "The wench has the root of the matter in her."

He turned to Flora with a smile she thought to be kind.

"I am abominably rude, Flora, and I beg your pardon. But that is because I care for these things, perhaps too much. If I could keep calm I would say to you : '*Kleinchen !* If you care, if you feel deeply, you also care to choose words that will properly express the depth of your feeling.'"

She was aware that his body was coming close to hers. He sought beneath the black cloak for her hands, and she surrendered them to his.

"You do feel deeply about these things, Flora. It is just that you have never been taught to express your feelings justly. How shall we teach you, little lady of the North?" He smiled on her. "Shall we start with a kiss?"

"You'll do nothing of the sort !"

Mrs. Julius Oliphant snatched her hands out of Mark's, and she even made a petulant pass at smacking his. The magic went from the moment, and only a desolation was left.

"I've never been so insulted in all my life!" declared the daughter of Iron Jock Gillanders. "I'm going down, and I'm——"

"Yes," Mark agreed. "We had better go down. *Les lauriers sont coupés*. But I suggest, Flora, that for your sake we had better go down together."

The re-entry to the drawing-room had, unhappily, a flavour of the theatrical. The remnants of the party were round a buffet-table near the door. To Flora it seemed an interminable stretch of waste land they had to traverse between the French windows and the group about it. She was miserably aware of her own blushes, of a few raised eyebrows, and above all of the scowl on Julius's flushed face.

"Here they are!" said Eustace mildly. "Been taking the air, children?"

"The very word, Father!" agreed Mark easily. "Also the full moon and the glimmering landscape fading on the sight. But Flora is tired of my quotations."

"Anyhow, it is lovely out there to-night," she contrived to assert. "Quite warm, too."

But there was still the anger of Julius to be encountered. She was as acutely aware of it as if he had brandished a fist in her face. It radiated from him so powerfully and obviously, she was almost panic-stricken to realise that it must be visible to people so sensitive as Emmy and Eustace and Mark; and probably Mark was amused. And Julius had been drinking.

Emmy made the opportunity for the ladies to retire. Up in her bedroom, trembling with fear, Flora suddenly thought of her cloak, flung over a bench on the terrace before they returned to the drawing-room. In her terrified mind it took on the character of a piece of evidence in a scandal. She flew downstairs, through the main door, and along the terrace. Nobody saw her; voices from the French windows assured her that the men were still round the buffet-table. But when she returned to the bedroom, flushed and panting, Julius was waiting for her: her enemy.

"At it again?" he challenged her roughly.

"What do you mean, Julius?"

"Don't Julius me! You know perfectly well what I mean. You're carrying on an affair with that young fool Mark. Don't think I haven't noticed things! Don't think I'm going to sit at table and be insulted by a nincompoop like that! Don't think I'm going to stand it for another minute! Or, by God, I'll——"

"Julius, dear! Don't shout. Everybody'll hear you."

"Well, let them dam' well hear me!" And now he was roaring in his frenzy of jealousy. "And a dam' sight less of your 'Julius

dears.' Make it ' Mark dears ' and be done with it. Don't think you can make a fool of me."

" Julius ! You're so—so—terribly. . . . O-o-o . . ."

She was aware of the shuddering fecklessness of her wail of grief and terror. As she threw herself on the bed to sob her heart out, she knew that this was how the thwarted heroines of romance were apt to behave ; but now she knew also that the gesture could be terribly real in its bitter naturalness.

He kept on flogging her prostrate body with cruel and heavy words.

" Oh, you can bubble away ! You'll learn your lesson. There's one thing you'll understand here and now. There's going to be no taking a house in England for you. You've spoiled the whole thing. You're not to be trusted. You're going back to Garvel to-morrow, and you're going to stay there ! "

She was on her knees before him, begging, not for any fine dream of her own, but for the kindness a woman must have or perish. And he thought in his passion that she was begging for forgiveness, and he spurned her. He started to pull at his tie and tug at his collar.

" Shut up ! I'm going to bed."

She collapsed into an armchair and went on sobbing. Julius undressed in a flurry of deliberate untidiness and heaved himself into the large double-bed, still accusing and abusing her, though now in a truculent mumble.

She watched him go to sleep in an instant and heard him start to snore. She sat on for a long time in the armchair, weeping quietly, emptied and stunned : partly grieved, to be sure, by the crash of a small social dream, but much more horribly shaken by this revelation of a hostility with which, somehow, she must contrive to reckon for all the years of her life to come. Flora knew herself to be at the end of a phase. One of the arches of the years had broken down. It was no use saying that Julius had simply had too much to drink. The drink had only exposed the roots of enmity.

. . . Mark, looking in to say good-night, was meanwhile being scolded in his mother's room.

" You make mischief, my son, and unnecessarily," pronounced Lady Alderford. " As you know, I care little enough for these conventions of the English, but I have some thought for those who are bound up in them. Now you grossly excite that foolish girl with your tongue and your romance. *Das ist schlecht.*"

" *Aber, meine liebe Mutter !* " Mark protested. " That was nothing. If you like, a mild flirtation on the roof. Do you imagine that I could be really interested in a Scotch *Hausfrau* ? "

" I do not," said Emmy. " But I can imagine your Scotch *Hausfrau* being too much interested in one liddle accident of romance.

She had never seen Vienna nor known our southern freedom. I fear that you may have—what is the word?—complicated her with that *Dummkopf* of her husband, and made her unhappy for long to come. That is vicked."

"As for those politics," Emmy resumed, "that distresses your Father and misleads yourself. You will be shouting like this Keir Hardie in Trafalgar Square one day. And that will be tiresome—so tiresome."

Lady Alderford was right in only one of her prophecies.

CHAPTER V

BLUEBELL LOOKS BACK

I

WHEN SHE had seen her father's body carried out of the house for burial on that gusty day of March, 1918, and while she waited for her brothers to return from the cemetery with their guest, the young woman for whom her mother had fondly and foolishly chosen the name of Bluebell nearly thirty years before thought profoundly of life as she had known it through three decades and sombrely considered what she might do with the equal period of time which, in the law of averages, still lay before her.

The hour was critical. The death of Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant had relieved her finally of subtle but still onerous obligations and, at the same time, roughly brought her face to face with a decision. The hour should have been exciting as well as critical, but she was conscious only of a faintly melancholy inertia such as might come on one who, passing through a churchyard in the twilight, reads in the epitaphs the old familiar story of mankind's sentimentalities, self-deceptions and ultimate frustration.

But Bluebell was without grief or self-pity. Her harshest feeling was of time lost and wasted, of capacities and emotions expended in vain. In another mood she could have analysed more clearly than most women the circumstances that had brought her to this pass and seen herself as the nearly inevitable product of a given set of social and economic circumstances. In reaction from the immediate strain of illness, death and obsequies, however, she found herself inclined to look back nostalgically along the corridors of time.

Odd little, half-forgotten scenes and sayings kept recurring. Out of the distant past they presented themselves in gigantic proportions now. It was not much that, for quarter of a century, she had disliked and despised her father, the man now dead and buried, while being sorry for him. It was so much more interesting to see on the lighted screen of memory the picture of the lovely *Iolanthe* lying in the bay off Inverquey and the wealthy, powerful, highly-respected Mr. Oliphant being rowed out in style in the gig to board her and order such a voyage as his lightest whim might suggest.

It seemed so long in the past, that picture : out of an age when wealth was really wealth and when the British world under Edward

the Seventh was lapped in a golden peace. Bluebell smiled wryly to think of Papa's explosive, stupid indignation over Lloyd George's Budget which, she saw now, was the beginning of the revolution and the end of such great inherited fortunes as had allowed him and many like him to live useless lives of near-luxury : lives stuffily upholstered like their late Victorian furniture, lives as safe from the common storms as that Bank of England, in which they trusted rather more firmly than they did in the God they ostensibly worshipped. But never safe from the storms that afflict the minds and hearts of all men and women.

Bluebell saw arise out of the turf of the old orchard in Shankland Terrace the fresh, pink masonry of the Oliphant Memorial Church. She remembered the smell of new-cut wood from the sheds in which the masons dressed the sandstone. And after a year, quarrelling with the Minister and the Kirk Session, Papa had indignantly and absurdly led his family out of his own memorial to his first wife and had ostentatiously attached himself, his second wife and his children to St. Luke's, the outpost of Episcopalianism in that Scottish seaport. She could still see his face reddening with indignation and hear his bluster :

" I'm dam' well going to worship where gentlemen are gentlemen. Those fellows down at the Memorial are getting a bit too dam' democratic for my taste. Wanting to order me about ! I built the place for them, didn't I ? Paid for it ? Would have built them a proper spire if they had only had the decency to listen to my opinion ? Well, they're left with a dam' stump for their pains, and much good may it do them ! "

It was sad and humiliating to recall that Papa was only in his mid-thirties when he had thus expressed himself. He had gone puffy and pompous and important within just a few years. Ah, yes ! He had been a handsome man. But wealth and indolence had so quickly matured him in the physical sense. He had died quite young, barely sixty years of age, but not before he had taken on a solid appearance as of a bluff, retired military man. When she thought of her father as he had been in the flesh, Bluebell always recalled the photographs she had seen of Sir Edward Elgar, the composer . Jack Alston had always insisted that Elgar matched the classical symphonists ; and he and she had been near each other while the Scottish played the Enigma Variations.

But Jack was one of those ideas a woman of nearly thirty had better forget : and Papa would have dismissed Elgar as a dam' fool of a fiddler ; no money in writing pieces, and why should there be ? That was the way he talked ; it was the manner he had passed on to his sons of dismissing the important, and therefore the difficult, in

a curt phrase that inevitably became a catchword within the family.

Sitting before the fire in her own room, the room that had been the sewing-room in the old days, Bluebell saw her mother across the years : the foolish, forgotten woman in whose memory the solid sandstone fabric of the Oliphant Memorial had been raised on the remorseful impulse of a dangerous and sentimental fool.

The fireplace was of the old-fashioned kind, three stout bars enclosing the glowing bundle of coal within an opening cut out of a black-leaded frame of iron. Bluebell, in a deep chair bought with her own money, considered the play of the flames beyond the toes of her outstretched feet within thin silk stockings, for she had kicked aside her shoes. She now and again considered the sheer black of the mourning dress she wore. It was really all so ludicrous, this formality of grief for a father who had in effect murdered her own mother.

Bluebell could clearly see the person of the first Mrs. Julius Oliphant, born Flora Gillanders : plump, pretty, flustered, kind and inveterately overdressed. She had no grief for her mother, dead nearly twenty years now ; her mother was just another of those pathetic female creatures who crossed the patriarchal stage and then disappeared. Even the solid ecclesiastical monument set up in her memory had been quickly abandoned by its pious founder ; and it bore his name, not hers. Great were the male Oliphants in this town of Garvel, and they would suffer no diminution of the name.

Bluebell smiled again, thinking of the significance of a name. It was strange now to reflect that for years she had blamed her mother for saddling herself with a name so silly as Bluebell—Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant in full. Rude people made tedious jokes about it. Strangers could not pronounce the second name properly, with the accent on the second syllable, and the rough ones among the girls at Miss Leonard's seminary for young ladies at Bourtree used to shriek with hysterical delight in what it suggested to them of the knacker's yard or the art of the surgeon. While Harry Lauder was singing his way to fame, her brothers could make her cry by merely humming a popular song behind her back. Ah ! there was much in a name ; but there was more in the pathetic, sentimental trust of the foolish woman who had chosen it for her.

And that woman was long dead. She had died tragically, but the curtain of time was down between the rawness of that remote fate and the anxious, self-centred mind of her daughter. Now that Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant was gone to face his Maker, everything of the past seemed to have lost its sharpness under the patina which the drag of the years smears over the human memory. The future alone was bright and challenging.

2

When Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant was still a little girl she was aware of a difference between herself and those about her in the villa called Agincourt. If she had not perceived the distinction for herself it would have been forced upon her by what was said in her hearing of her quaint ways.

Often, when she had made what seemed to her a perfectly normal remark, her mother would smile and gather her into an ample bosom and, hugging her warmly, exclaim: "My, what a funny, old-fashioned wee thing you are!" and Bluebell would be puzzled to know how, at the age of five or six, she could possibly be old-fashioned. Bridget, her tolerant and beloved nurse, much more constant in care and affection even than her mother, was for ever exclaiming as at oddity.

"Did you ever hear the likes of that!" the good girl would address an unseen audience, calling for admiration of her charge. "You've got a real old head on your young shoulders, bairn! Come, pet, and I'll do your hair for you. How in the name of goodness you manage to get that crock-comb the way it is . . ." And Bridget's embraces were longer and tenderer than those of her own mother.

Bluebell was never guilty of seeking to be different from others in the house nor proud of the fact that she apparently was. It puzzled and troubled her especially when, in the open warfare of the nursery, her older brother Ambrose and her younger brother Jerome (both called after Mama's transient heroes of fiction) made faces at her and pulled derisory grimaces and called her "Sneak" or "Nosey Parker," or, in the venacular, "Clype," the informer, till she wept bitterly for sheer vexation in being misunderstood.

It was only in the slightly bitter calm of her own maturity that the woman clearly saw the child she had been as an urchin of more than average intelligence in a not very intelligent household, a girl-child lonely and starved of all but the vicarious affection of a solid nursemaid. Mama was always having new babies, it seemed, and Mama's affections, invariably warm, were consequently apt to be spasmodic and faintly distracted. At a remarkably early age Bluebell knew that Mama's troubles arose out of her relationship with Papa.

Papa was at once the central menace and puzzle of Bluebell's young life, and her intelligence was continually baffled to plot his right place in her own pattern of things. She knew that he was all-important and that she ought to love him dearly; Mama kept harping on that; but while his power was continually visible about her, the infant had never liked him. Often enough he would be in the mood to

fondle and pet her—"spoiling the child," said Mama—but these attentions would come out of the blue rather to frighten than to please her. It was not just that his fair moustache was prickly and that he would use it brusquely on the tender skin of her neck and cheeks. It was not only that she disliked the mingled smells of drink and tobacco which were apt to be on his breath in the evening. It was not even that he was often short and ill-tempered and impatient, telling her to hold her tongue or threatening to box her ears. The sensitive child-mind knew that little Bluebell was not really a very important part of the life that was increasingly spent apart even from Mama, and that his occasional endearments were not warmed by any verity of love.

There was before her all through her childhood the plain fact that he favoured his sons far above his only daughter. Ambrose and Jerome were in his company for hours as against the minutes she was privileged to spend with him. Ambrose and Jerome were taken for trips in the *Iolanthe* while she was, as a matter of domestic planning, left behind with Bridget. For the boys he built the workshop in the stable buildings, and he would happily spend an hour with them out there, while, a knot of curiosity and jealousy, little Bluebell had to lie on her belly on the nursery floor and read *Chatterbox*, with Bridget darning the boys' stockings by the fire.

There was the time when, Mama being about to give birth to her third son, Rupert, he had taken Ambrose and Jerome to London and had completely forgotten the birthday of his second-born, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant. She waited thrice daily for the postman, but there was never a parcel from London, and Bridget (as she told her young mistress when they were laughing over the foolish past twenty years later) saved a small soul from a calamity of the spirit by rushing to Glasgow on her afternoon off and dispatching a large parcel from the Arcade.

(But what is happiness? Bluebell asked herself as she sat warming her feet before the fire in the old sewing-room. The little girl who hated her name had never been consciously unhappy. It was only when you looked back that you saw the pathos of a given situation: precisely as Charles Dickens could never for long get away from self-pity . . . Bluebell, at nearly thirty, wondered if her father had ever read one work by Dickens through. Mama, dying, had peevishly declared the Works to be "terribly long-winded. I just lose myself. It's all above my head, really." Mama had lately encountered the narrative genius of Madame Sarah Grand and was at the moment entranced by *Babs, the Impossible*.)

Bluebell, the child, was in fact not at all unhappy. Her interest in the life about her was so acute and unresting that her days were full

of wonder. Her life was in herself, so that all about her save Bridget, even her mother, were fragments of the environment rather than individuals with claims upon her. The amenities of existence in that large suburban villa were ordered for her so that no concern of hunger or cold touched her, or even occurred to her. Her only want was one of which she realised the importance only in her maturity—that lack of companionship, that loneliness of a little girl in a household dominated by men and only spasmodically controlled by a chronically pregnant woman.

Thus she was " quaint " and " old-fashioned ; " thus she was, almost inevitably, the Nosey Parker and the Clype of her brothers' hostility. She was the cat that walked alone, the child that looked and listened, fading into the background, behind curtains, under tables and beds, like any cheetah among the dappled forest leaves.

Bluebell at nearly thirty, toasting her toes before the nursery fire, did not look upon the child she had been with either admiration or pity. Now she thought that the quiet, watchful, listening, inquisitive infant was probably a little beast within the terms of workaday existence. That child of the 'nineties had never compromised, and compromise was the only way of getting through the tangle of absurdities, aspiration, conflicts and egotisms men called Life. Bluebell at nearly thirty could only be sorry for the creature's loneliness and interested in its queer hunger for an adult understanding of adult ways. Being now poised, set for battle, and as sure of herself as any spinster woman may be, she was bitterly sorry for that other little, almost forgotten, girl who had been the witness of cruelty and vulgarity as between those whom she should have most warmly loved and profoundly respected.

It was when the third boy, Mama's fourth baby, had only just appeared inside a cabbage in the vegetable garden that the trouble started. It came at Bluebell from several directions at once, mystifying her and making her positively and consciously unhappy for at least a month on end, loading her indeed with a sense of unhappiness at the core of the household's life that did not leave her until Mama was dead and she, the only daughter, had utterly abandoned her wish to believe in Papa as a good, kind man.

Papa was the very rock of frustration. Approach him as sweetly as a pretty girl-child could compass, even plan a careful insinuation into his graces, and there was always something in Papa of brusqueness or false joviality, of ill temper or sheer inability to follow the delicate processes of the female mind, that tossed you out of his private life and all the more deeply entangled you in the furtive intricacies of your own.

On the afternoon of the day the new baby was born Bluebell,

profiting from the distraction of her elders, slipped into the great, dark room that had come to be called the Library. This was almost forbidden territory, but not quite. Often enough she had played on its wide, carpeted spaces, but always under the supervision of Mama or Bridget, and now she had a small sense of guilt in invading the room alone, in pulling out books from the shelves, and in reading bits of the strange things grown-ups put into books and wanted to read.

Her sharp eye had long ago marked a tall folio on the lowest shelf near the fire. Even in a child's eye its binding had a look of special consequence. Down the long spine ran the legend : " Narrative of the Proceedings of the House of Oliphant : 1783-1869." The pages within the dull green batters were of a thick blue parchment, but smelling of damp and neglect.

The record was in manuscript. This was a round, bold, clerkly hand, not a little finicky in the matters of capitals, hyphens and colophons. The ornate scrolls on the preliminary page told that the Narrative was the pious work in his retirement of Ebenezer Maclaren, for sixty years a faithful employee in the Counting House of the trading firm of Oliphant's in Garvel, latterly Cashier with the shipping and shipbuilding enterprise of Oliphant, Rait and Company. A special letter of dedication on the second page indicated that, in penning his only work of literature, Ebenezer Maclaren was anxious " to erect a monument, however frail and unstable, and in whatever halting phrases, to the memory of my revered and distinguished master, Julius Oliphant, Esquire, of Goldenhaddock and, latterly, Guatemala Lodge."

The darkness of the November evening falling about her, her fair ringlets of hair hanging over the musty pages like stalactites of confectionery, the child read for the first time, and for the first time understood clearly what she had been told in sketchy family talk, of the distinction of her great-grandfather, the designer of ships, who had written his name in shipbuilding history in the lines of the glorious, short-lived, ill-fated clipper *Constant Star*. She read of how her grandfather Ivie Oliphant, old Julius's second son, had perished with that fabulous ship and her company in the region of Long. 10 E. and Lat. 30 S. She learned of the good looks of her grand-uncle Walter Oliphant, of his historic fight against the cholera epidemic, and of his remote death in Scutari, working among the wounded from the Crimea. She was stirred to realise, what had so often been slurred over in the talk of her elders, that her father had had an American mother, herself an American grandmother, won by the wild Ivie Oliphant through the blockade in the Civil War.

So absorbed was the girl in these records that gave her a new

sense of position in the world of men and a feeling of at last understanding and belonging to the mysterious town of Garvel which surrounded the villa-world of Agincourt; so profoundly was she moved by the awareness of brilliant life and drama in people of her own stock, hitherto but names, Bluebell was caught out by the sudden opening of the door and the entrance of her father.

There was no escape. She was afraid of an outburst, but she knew it was best to stay there, kneeling on the carpet and pretending to read quietly.

"Hullo! You there?" he said, apparently in a good mood. "How's your mother?"

"She was doing nicely, Nurse said about an hour ago," replied Bluebell primly, adding unveraciously: "I thought I'd better come down here and keep out of the way."

"You could go to your nursery, couldn't you?" Papa observed, but with a smile.

He had been out all afternoon, and he was preoccupied. The child watched him open a cupboard, produce a decanter and help himself to a drink.

"Papa!" she dared to engage his more particular attention.

"Yes, dear."

"What are we going to call the new baby?"

"What are we going to call the new baby? *We?* That's Mama's business. I think she wants to call him Rupert. Quite nice, I thought. Why do you ask, child?"

"I was wondering," she hesitated, really pleading with him. "We don't seem to be like other children, who are called after their aunts and uncles. I thought it would be nice to call the baby Ivie, or Walter."

He swung round on her from the fire, frowning.

"How did you get this nonsense into your head?"

"I was reading this funny old book," said Bluebell simply.

He advanced on her, scowling now, stooped, pulled the folio from under her eyes and snapped it shut with a bang.

"That's not for the likes of you," he said. "You mind your own business in future, and don't let me see you prowling about my library again. Now run away up to your nursery. Go on, before I get angry."

That was Papa, always incalculable. Bluebell cried a little as she made her way upstairs, but she fought to hold the tears back, for Bridget would be sure to ask questions about wet, red eyes. The child's disappointment was indeed beyond tears now. You tried again and again to get near Papa, and he would be friendly and jovial for a minute of two, and then he would turn angry and unreasonable all of

a sudden. A little girl saw herself facing the horror of having to give up trying to make friends with Papa altogether.

Her perceptions, subtle enough already, had let her understand that in this particular hour of Mama's fourth confinement the queerness of Papa arose out of one special, frightening circumstance.

Always listening, sometimes standing unseen in corners of kitchen or passage or bedroom while the servants were working, she had heard the maids talk of the trouble in the house. They were guarded in their exchanges, even when they did not know that she was there, but Bluebell had perceived for herself that the uneasiness which filled the fabric of Agincourt like the suspicion of a bad smell from a drain had its focus in one intrusive personality. Even as she approached the nursery after having been dismissed by Papa, she paused outside the door to hear Bridget, beloved and trusted, speak gravely to Lena McIlhenny the housemaid and, with alarm at the use of such words, hear the Irishwoman break out self-righteously about " that hard-faced bitch setting her cap at the Master, and herself upstairs, poor dear, with the pains not long dead on her, and the baby boy howling his soul out to be at her paps."

Bluebell had already decided on her own account that Nurse had brought something evil into the house with her. She had been formally summoned from Glasgow, a novelty in her day, a trained nurse to assist Dr. Wedderspoon and stand by Mama through the first four weeks or so of the baby's life. She appeared in Agincourt as a phenomenon, with her wide starched cap like a nun's, her spotless wrapper, her starched collar, cuffs and apron, her black stockings and buckled shoes. What offended Lena and the other servants, even the privileged Bridget, was that this incomer, surely a servant herself, ate with the family and demanded service like any member of the family.

Bluebell saw Nurse as a fresh-faced, determinedly clean woman, as pretty as a competent spinster might be at thirty or thereabouts. She had pretty brown hair, curling naturally, a sculptured nose, and clear, cold grey eyes. The child disliked her at first sight and first hearing. She was too bright and confident for such a misty, puzzled thing as Bluebell. Nurse started by addressing her as " Kid," and Bluebell was one of the Oliphants with whom only Bridget could dare to be familiar ; she knew that this was a weakness of social aggression on Nurse's part. She had seen in the sickroom that Nurse was bright, brisk, bossy and contemptuous with poor Mama. The worst of it was that, sitting at the family table, Nurse was arch and bright with Papa, and that Papa was in return archer and brighter than Bluebell had ever seen him with Mama.

She did not spy on them. She was too afraid of what she might

see for that. Indeed, the child avoided places in the house where Nurse and Papa might be together, and she was in the very act of escaping from them when she witnessed their treachery. She had seen Nurse move along the passage as if making for the kitchen and Papa go into the drawing-room, and she slipped into the conservatory to avoid both of them.

She had forgotten the French window in the drawing-room and the passage to the back garden by the pantry and store-room, and she had walked blindly into their place of rendezvous. The soft opening of the outer doors of the conservatory and a warm whispering held her frozen in the shadow of a great palm. In the light of the lamp in the drive she saw them in each other's arms. Papa was kissing the woman hungrily, and she was kissing him back. The child's mind went blank in her alarm and she fled, but her slippers were soft, and the rapt lovers did not hear her.

Bluebell sped upstairs and locked herself in the nursery lavatory. She was sick with fear and disgust. At five she did not know the implications of what she had seen, but instinct filled her with a sense of something disgusting in that furtive relationship. Above all she knew it to be a horrible betrayal, a dirty treachery to poor Mama lying upstairs with her baby—and his : the baby which was in that woman's charge.

The secret was a terror that would not leave her. It kept her awake at nights, so that Bridget puzzled over her peaked face and shadowed eyes and made her swallow unpleasant medicines. She prayed that the days might pass quickly and nurse's engagement end, but she had no confidence that the thing would stop there. A sense of something irrevocably done possessed her ; she had the sure instinct that a chain of events thus started could not be broken without pain and clamour. It was a cruel story she felt herself forced to read to the bitter end.

Her own naughtiness made her a witness of the next inevitable act of the melodrama. Thinking that Papa was out and Mama resting after one of her first excursions downstairs, Bluebell slipped into the library one pale early winter afternoon, bent on losing herself again in that alluring " Narrative of the Proceedings of the House of Oliphant." Lost she was when a wrangle of angry voices on the stairs and then in the hall terrified her. She was caught in a trap like any rabbit. There was just time to push the folio back into its place and to leap over a horsehair sofa and tumble into the dark triangle it made against the corner by the fire before Mama and Papa entered the room, quarrelling loudly and angrily, saying cruel and vulgar things to each other. Bluebell could see them through the tassels of a draping over one end of the sofa.

Mama's face was pale but blotched by the pink patches of her

anger; her hair was wildly disordered, and Bluebell was sure she was out of her mind. Papa's handsome face was puffed and red.

"That woman goes out of this house to-night, or I go out!" Mama was screaming.

"Shut up, you fool!" Papa snarled. "You'll have every servant in the house at the door, listening to your ravings!"

"I don't care. They're welcome. I'd warn every one of them against the likes of you."

"Shut that filthy mouth of yours, you bitch!"

Then the blow was struck. It was just a short, vicious jab of Papa's forearm, the clenched fist taking Mama in the stomach. She winced. She gasped and was silent, and that silence was intolerable, heavy with tragedy, after their screaming and shouting. The child saw Papa's face suddenly go worried and puzzled over the enormity of the thing he had done. It was momentarily the face of a fool who realises for a second that his folly is criminal. Papa turned and ran like a frightened booby from the scene of his violence.

At that Mama started to scream again. She had collapsed into a chair, panting with terror and perhaps pain for a space, but now she raised her head like an animal and cried aloud for attention in an abandoned medley of shrieks and sobs and wails, madly punctuated by peals of laughter. The watching, fascinated child felt that she ought to run to comfort Mama, but this enormity was beyond both her courage and her knowledge. It also absurdly occurred to her that Mama was behaving like a bad baby, as she certainly looked one. Bluebell lowered her head between her knees and wept.

She raised her head again to the noise of the door opening violently. Bridget came hurrying in, the Nurse behind her. At the sight of the latter Mama's crying became louder and wilder than ever, but the Nurse advanced on Mama, her expression firm, and took her by the wrist.

"Come, Mrs. Oliphant," she said sensibly.

"Better leave this to me!" Bridget intervened sharply. "You'll have the poor soul off her head. Don't you see, you fool? . . ."

Bridget alone got Mama quietened down and led her away, crying bleakly now like a lost child. Bluebell heard a door open and shut, then rapid footsteps on the gravel of the drive. Was it Papa running away, or Nurse leaving, or one of the girls sent to fetch the doctor? She did not care. It was all over now. Life had come to an end in terror and degradation.

3

Often in her maturity Bluebell thought of that quality of time which forbids the ending of life save by death. She would think morbidly enough of those seemingly monstrous crises within families that could pass and apparently be forgotten, mere cat's-paws of storm on the placid surface of existence. She knew well that they were never wholly forgotten; the nails left their marks always; but how remarkable the recovery of appearances at least, and how strong the need of men and women to have the illusion of normality restored!

Brooding before the nursery fire that day of his funeral, Bluebell could smile, however wryly, to think of the attentions Papa was paying to Mama within a week of that scene in the library and the happy simpering with which she received them. Flowers, peaches, chocolates, cushions for her back when she sat down, the screen before a fire too bright, and always "Quiet, you children! Mama is resting." The Nurse just disappeared, silently, secretly, completely. Bluebell had dared to ask Bridget the manner of her departure, and Bridget had been too happy in a good riddance of bad rubbish to be angry.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," she declared in a favourite trope of hers. "Gone—and forgotten! Now, go and take the nailbrush to those hands of yours. They're a disgrace."

It was queer, alarmingly so, that Mama in her last years could placidly open a reminiscent conversation with "When I was so ill, after Rupert came . . ." But that was before she became really ill. She was well enough during the next four years to bear Papa another child, another son, completing the triumvirate of the Four Boys that was to influence Bluebell's own life so overwhelmingly and to bring her now, on the very day of Papa's funeral, face to face with a decision. She gave him an exotic name, Tristram, having fallen under the powerful spell of Anthony Hope: by far poor Mama's highest flight in literary appreciation.

The effects of that scene, the still young woman reflected, reaching to the mantelpiece for the packet of cigarettes she and Bridget shared indiscriminately, were strongest on herself. Now she could see how the faintly eccentric child had for years unconsciously sought to evade the company of both Papa and Mama lest the horror recur. That was how she became "old-fashioned . . . a queer wee body," in Bridget's affectionate phrases. She was always trying to escape; not only from Papa for his incontinence of temper, not only from Papa and Mama together for fear the devil should start cavorting between them again; but from the stuffy loneliness of the life Papa's wealth imposed upon her.

And they were really quite pleasant years, those years of the mid-nineties, when the Oliphant children were growing up together and for three glorious months each summer Agincourt was abandoned and shuttered and they lived at Inverquey or on board the *Iolanthe*. That was the funny thing.

Bluebell, the child, was happiest in the yacht. It formed such an attractive special world apart ; it was as good as having a small island of one's own, or nearly as good. The most satisfactory circumstance, however, was that the children were rarely allowed on board when Papa and Mama had a party of grown-up guests, so that, save for an occasional day's sail on the Firth for somebody's birthday treat, they were freest of the yacht when Papa was away in London on business or down in Galloway shooting with his friend Bill Hercus of the Thread Mills. Then Mama, always so happy and kind when alone with her babies, would take Bridget and establish them all in their own wonderful cabins in the *Iolanthe*, and it was a perfect picnic that might last a whole week in fine weather, even if the yacht lay all the time at her moorings in the bay of Inverquey.

Once, for Bluebell's own eighth birthday treat, Papa being far away in Paris for the Exhibition with Bill Hercus and other cronies, they were allowed a real trip to sea, beyond the Firth and round the Mull to Oban.

That—the mature Bluebell knew—had been one of the critical experiences in several ways. The skipper had been carefully instructed to make the voyage in short stages : no steaming by night ; wait for a calm day before rounding the Mull ; cast anchor early to let the children ashore to stretch their legs. So the *Iolanthe* dawdled down the Firth and up among the islands at half-speed for an hour or two each day, coming quietly and gracefully to anchor in mid-afternoon in little bays or remote sea-lochs where, no doubt, within the few white cottages ashore, Captain Angus Maclachlan or members of his crew could count on finding congenial, Gaelic-speaking company.

The revelation of the West Highland beauty and peace moved the child profoundly. It was as if she had suddenly been given as a birthday present the freedom of that wonderful world which, as seen in glimpses through the windows of Agincourt or even more closely from Inverquey, had the remote, forbidden quality of a background in an Old Master's painting. She was startled by the nearness of so much brilliant colour, changing endlessly on the shoulders of great hills or across an expanse of wet, deserted sand. She could exult to see the sun go down behind Kintyre in such a blaze of fiery, illuminated cloud that it seemed, somehow, not so much an effect of colour as of noise : the splendid noise of a great orchestra with all the brass blaring and the deep strings booming. She could just as easily have tears in her eyes at the

sight of a single thorn surviving with brave, pathetic grace amid a colony of gulls on a nearly barren islet.

It was so strange in later years to have this first awareness of beauty all confused in the memory with the vulgar, cheerful image of Tommy Maclusky, her first friend outside the family circle! Tommy was the pantry boy in *Iolanthe*, a red-headed, pale-faced child of fourteen with an adenoidal affliction which greatly increased Bluebell's difficulty in understanding his natural speech, a sufficiently clotted affair of glottal stops and the shards of three different dialects. But Tommy was frank and kind and innocent as well as garrulous, and their brief friendship was perfect in its sexless cordiality.

Bluebell had seen him often enough as he flitted along the alleyways in soiled sandshoes and with high piles of dirty dishes in his arms to be washed, always careful to get out of the way of his betters as he had been fiercely instructed by the chief steward to do. She came upon him intimately when the rest of the ship's company seemed to be asleep and the yacht lay in a small loch with the husk of an old castle overlooking its entrance.

Bluebell had been "laid down" in Bridget's nursery phrase, "with a nice book," but her inveterate curiosity took her exploring, rather furtively, while Mama and Bridget rested, those mysterious, alluring parts of the ship below decks she had been discouraged, if not positively prevented, from seeing for herself—that queer sour-smelling, shadowy underworld of any ship, peopled by troglodytes in cheap cotton singlets, that the passenger rarely sees.

Tommy Maclusky, seated on a lemonade case, was baiting a hook with mussel at a large port cut in the vessel's side near the engine-room. He did not stir at Bluebell's approach, for this was his watch off and he was a Radical by nature, but he blushed when the young lady paused to stare at him.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Fushin'," replied Tommy Maclusky.

"What do you catch?"

"Whities and flukies."

"What are they?"

"Juist whities and flukies—fush," Tommy marvelled at her ignorance, adding generously: "Wid ye like a shot?"

He lowered the line for her and held her wrist while, for the first time in her life, she knew the exciting sensation of feeling the tug of the tide on a cord with its leaden sinker bumping lightly on the sand four fathoms below. The dirty, strong hand of the pantry boy completely covered the white, slim fingers of the owner's daughter when a tug and a wriggling were alarmingly communicated from the depths.

" Ye've got yin ! Ye've got yin ! " cried Tommy happily. " Haul 'm in ! Pull in yer line ! . . . Jings ! A beezer."

A large flat fish with a wry mouth slapped on the plates at her feet. This was a miracle. It was the most exciting game Bluebell had ever played. She was eager to continue.

" That's a rare big flukie," said Tommy approvingly, " but it's ma shot now."

That was in order. They were children at play, wholly respecting the rules. Tommy said that if she would come down again to-morrow he would have another line ready for her so that they could both fish at the same time. She was delighted when Tommy caught a whiting. Her own next turn—or shot, according to the pantry boy—was a blank, for she had allowed a fish to suck the bait off her hook. She accepted Tommy's ruling that the next shot was therefore his. She was utterly absorbed, and she was heavy at heart when Bridget came seeking her and led her up to the seclusion of the owner's quarters.

Fishing with Tommy became her chief joy on the cruise. The funny thing was that Mama, when told what she had been doing, just smiled vaguely and said " That must have been nice," and nobody seemed to care much what she did. Officers and engineers would pause in the alleyway to smile at the quaint couple and offer advice. All that made the end of the friendship the more humiliating and horrible.

It was partly her own fault, no doubt. She should have remembered that Papa, wiring unexpectedly from Glasgow, would be in Oban with the evening train. If the yacht, lying close in to the Kerrera shore, had only swung on another tide she would have seen the launch crossing the Sound from the mainland. And she just forgot, absorbed in the companionship of sport with Tommy Maclusky, and somebody forgot to come and fetch her in time. Bridget's appearance along the alleyway frightened her.

Her predicament was clear in Bridget's worried look and the tug with which she was pulled away from her game. There was the unmistakable presage of storm in Bridget's agitated and yet subtly protective grip on her hand. She was pushed into the big cabin, and the door was closed behind her.

Papa was in one of his rages. Bluebell perfectly understood the association of his flushed face and the decanter, siphon and glass on the table. She fought against panic to keep her head : for the first time bringing a slightly sullen hostility against her father in his unreason. Yet she could recall after twenty years the concern with which, a child to whom Paris was but a name, she noted how ill he looked and how his hands shook.

"And where have you been?"

"Fishing, Papa."

"Where? Who with?"

"Down below. With the pantry boy, Papa."

"The pantry boy, by God!"

There it was, the slashing opening gambit. He knew all about it; it had all been, with whatever trepidation on Mama's part, explained to him.

"Hobnobbing with the pantry boy, and stinking like a fishwife! But when your Father comes home from abroad, you're too taken up with your own affairs to come and meet him."

"I'm very sorry, Papa, and I truly apologise. It was very selfish of me."

"Selfish! I should dam' well think it was! Let me tell you one thing, my girl," and he seemed to the little girl a very menacing and powerful figure. "If this weren't your birthday treat, you'd be mighty sorry for yourself by now. And it's got to stop, do you understand? You've got to learn what your place is. Your place is up here beside me—and your mother, of course. You're supposed to be a lady. Well, try to be a lady, and don't let me see you ever again trailing after a guttersnipe out of the Glasgow slums. Why your mother didn't . . . Oh, go away! Before I . . ."

When she was grown up and had forgotten the pain, Bluebell came to know that Papa's motives were as complex as his methods were crude. The drink, his chronic irritant, was only his way of escape from the traps that unearned wealth had laid about his inadequate personality. In this storm he had been, in his way, honestly protecting a bit of cherished private property—herself; at the height of his blustering passion he had been a frightened man. There were moods in which you could be sorry for what Papa had been, but never was she able to forget that in his crude awareness of power he had given an order, so that when the *Iolanthe* at length returned to her moorings Tommy Maclusky was put off the ship.

Bluebell's reverie was broken by the entrance of Bridget with the tray for tea. She put it down with a clatter and asked cheerfully:

"Were you sleeping?"

"No, just brooding. How are the children?"

"They're fine. Rosie is back at her painting, and Chris is as happy as a sandboy cutting out dresses for her paper dolls."

She filled the cups and pushed a plate of home-baked scones across the table.

"Brooding, were you?" she observed.

Bridget spoke familiarly to the young woman who was nominally

her mistress. They were two women in the confidence born of responsibility shared.

"Plenty to brood about, isn't there?" Bluebell asked with a cynical smile. "My late lamented father; what we are going to do with poor Rosie and little Chris; what I am going to do with my own old age. . . ."

"Old age, blethers!" Bridget protested briskly. "Look at me! Thirty years with this family and more, ever since your poor mother was carrying Ambrose. And I'm not done yet."

"Poor Mama!" Bluebell muttered.

"Aye! Queer things have happened in this house since I came here as a girl, not much more than a raw lass out of a ploughman's cothouse up by the Brig o' Gryffe. Did I ever even have time to take a fancy to a man and have bairns of my own? Looking after other folks' bairns. . . ."

"Was I ever allowed to get my own man and have bairns of my own?" retorted Bluebell bitterly.

"There's still time for the bairns."

"There isn't, and you know it, Bridget."

"We'll see."

"We'll go on seeing what we have been seeing for the last ten years. A couple of spinster women with a couple of helpless girl-children on our hands. Unless——"

"I don't want to hear about your unless's."

"They frighten me as much as they frighten you. But——"

"Aye! Always the 'but.'"

"Probably pet rabbits in their hutches say that when they dream of getting out among the cabbages."

"Still——"

Their ellipses confessed the complexity of the trouble they shared. They had in common so much knowledge of a given situation. So much influence on the complex life of the last of the Oliphants had been exerted from this meagre, upstairs room of the villa called Agincourt. They thought automatically of the same long and twisted chain of circumstance which had now culminated in the death of Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant.

"Still," Bridget insisted, "what's past is past."

"But it isn't, Bridget," Bluebell corrected her old friend quietly. "It is very much in the present. It's in this room here and now. It's in your mind, and it's in my mind, and we are both unhappy and undecided on that account."

"There were bad times," Bridget allowed.

"Yes, but the queer thing is—or so I've been thinking this last hour—the bad times weren't necessarily those that mattered most in

the long run. How can I explain it? Well, you and I remember, we'll never forget, that awful time when Rupert was born—that fool of a nurse, that dreadful quarrel. You and I are the only people in the world now who know that he struck her and what came of it."

"Hush, Bell! For God's sake, dear! They're both gone now," Bridget pleaded, rising in a fidget to clear the table.

"Yes, and I'm quite cold and dead about it all. The whole story means no more to me now than that silly church he built out of remorse and self-pity. My father really wrote me off as his daughter that afternoon. I stopped even trying to care about him then, and it came that I did hardly care at all. Then he made me really dislike him one day at Oban, long, long ago, when I was caught fishing with the pantry boy in the *Iolanthe*. It wasn't just how he treated me. It was the way he visited my small sin on that poor red-headed boy, the way he was really getting at Mama through me and wee Tommy Maclusky."

"I remember," said Bridget, running one of her plump fingers round the edge of a plate. "And there were the two of them after your poor mother."

"Did they ever matter at all, poor dears?" asked Bluebell with a harsh laugh. "All the damage was done long before they came and went."

"Except that they left us Rosie and Chris," Bridget observed sharply.

"True," agreed Bluebell, "and still that doesn't matter. It all began between Papa and Mama, and sometimes I think"—she laughed again, but emptily now—"that I must have been the trouble. But what I was going all this long way round to say . . . Oh, do sit down, Bridget, and stop pretending you're going to be terribly busy! . . . What I have been thinking all afternoon, making myself as happy as a lark, is that some of the nice things in life have been just as important as the ugly things. In fact, just one day in my young life was so full of happiness that it still makes me happy to think of it. Are you listening, Bridget?"

"Go on."

"It was at Inverquey one summer, when I was ten. You were away for a week somewhere."

"Aye, my poor old mother was dying. But tell me . . ."

. . . In the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and almost in the very hour of the old lady's triumphal drive through the London streets, John Gillanders, Esquire, of Inverquey, had a shock, the first of a series that led to his death (by a coincidence that became part of a family legend) on that same day of January, 1901, on which the royal life passed peacefully to its close in distant Osborne.

The stroke changed the nature of the old man overnight. Its effect was like that of a religious conversion. Iron Jock—the strongest man in the Iron Ring, the breaker of a score of strikes, the cautious buyer, the keen seller—was transformed into a mild old country gentleman.

The hard, whiskered but always shapely face took on an aspect that an observer without knowledge of his past might fairly have described as saintly. When he was sufficiently recovered from the first attack to be out of doors, his delight was to potter about the garden at Inverquey, amiably regarding the flowers and vastly surprising his gardeners by suggesting expensive developments, notably an Orchid House that would cost a mint of money to keep in fuel during any Scottish winter, let alone the capital outlay and the wages of a special man brought up from Kew. In the old, sad way of humanity, those of his servants who had cursed him for a skinflint now tapped their temples significantly and implied their own unhappy victimisation by a lunatic spendthrift.

The women of his household lost their fear of a stern master and were tenderly sorry for " the poor old soul " ; and the one among them most profoundly affected by the change was Bluebell, his only granddaughter. She had feared him greatly while he was master of life and affairs, and now she was called to be his favourite companion. When the Oliphant children were at Inverquey there was a ritual whereby, at about eleven in the forenoon and five of the afternoon on fine days, the old man was heard tapping his stick on the tiles of the entrance hall and asking, " Where's my little Bluebell ? Where's my wee friend to take her Grandpa for a walk ? " and the house would resound with cries of " Bluebell ! Grandpa's waiting," or " Where's that girl ? Dreaming as usual ! " or " Drop that book at once, child, and get downstairs ! "

At first, Bluebell neither liked nor disliked these outings. She had neither friends nor duties nor any freedom of her own, and to go for a walk with Grandpa was just one of those things a little Victorian girl did without either protest or enthusiasm. Slowly but surely, however, the autumnal charm of the old man's kindness and patience, his friendliness as of one child to another, worked through her indifference. He would stop on the path to admire a clump of one of his favourite flowers and tell her about its history, habits and culture ; or he would point his walking stick at one of the plaster statues and give her the story of its prototype.

Thus old Iron Jock Gillanders, melting back into his original humanity, and without thought of gain for the first time in many years, won a child's interest and so her trust and affection. Latterly she waited for him to come downstairs, watching the weather

anxiously. On wet days they shared his sitting-room, and respect for their privacy was of the first order in the household economy.

"And you would wonder," said Flora Macphail the tablemaid to the cook, returning with the two glasses that had held milk, warm from the cow, the old man and the young girl had with biscuits at half-past four every afternoon. . . . "You would wonder what they see in each other. There's him just sitting there in his big chair forenent the fire and snoring through thon big, bold nose of his; and she's curled up like a whelk on the sofa, and her nose in a big book. It's a queer idea of diversion altogether."

Then came that one day of early September when, though it was still warm, the first, subtle signs of approaching winter were in the colour of the northern sunlight. There was no mist about the Firth, neither hint of frost nor whiff of vegetable corruption in the air, and the striped awning was in fact being run up over the *Iolanthe's* quarter-deck out in the bay, for Papa was taking a party of English gentlemen to visit Bill Hercus at his new place on the Kyles. Even so, there was in the sunlight a subtle quality of the tawny, exquisitely matching the turn of colour in the leaves of the great beeches down by the South Lodge. Across the rough slopes of the hills behind the house the harvest sun laid a carpet of light as rich and deep as the glow on a buttercup.

Iron Jock and his granddaughter were resting in an arbour that the gardeners had contrived out of the body of an old yew-tree on the paddock beside the house. A silence had lasted long between them, and the old man's breaking of it was sudden.

"There's gold on the hills to-day, child," he said.

"Gold? Oh, yes, the sunlight! It's pretty."

"Gold on the hills," the failing voice repeated mysteriously. "It's a powerful thing is gold."

He covered the child's hand with his gnarled fingers and asked her a question she found surprising.

"Have you any money of your own, lass?"

"Money? Yes, grandpa. I have five silver sixpences in my work-box upstairs."

"No, no! I'm not asking you for a loan, bairn!" the old man chuckled. "Money, income, a bit laid by for a rainy day. . . . No, you wouldn't." He seemed to be talking mainly to himself. "But I'll see you will. A lass should always have a bit money of her own. It's a hard world for a girl alone or dependent. There's nobody but your old Grandpa. . . . But we'll see about that. Come, Bell, and we'll see how the chrysanths are doing."

It was a good many years before she understood what had been in the mind of Iron Jock that day, and the immediate effect of his

strange speech on her young mind was to fill it with a romantic, fanciful association of gold with the hills. These had always been forbidden her; young ladies in her position did not go wandering the countryside like a farmer's child; and now their mystery was suddenly irresistible. She got into her head the wonderful notion, absurd as she knew it at the back of her mind to be, and yet a glorious chance, that if only she could climb up there over the skyline she would come on a hidden kingdom where the rocks would be of gleaming gold, and the birds as bright and coloured as the parrots and humming-birds in her picture-books, and there would be golden apples hanging on the trees.

As it turned out, that very afternoon was made her own. Grandpa had taken to his bed. Mama was going to tea with Lady Macadam at Ardhallow Castle and was too excited to plan the rest of the day for her daughter. Bluebell was enjoined by the nurserymaid, Ellen (who hoped for a quiet afternoon, making over the black velvet pelisse the mistress had splendidly given her), to lie down in her own room with a nice book.

So there was nobody to stop the child when she slipped by way of the hothouses and through the kitchen garden to the paddock. Her brother Ambrose was having his riding lesson on Tuffy, the Shetland pony, in the paddock, young Donald Macvicar the stableboy in attendance, but he was much too proud and absorbed to take notice of a mere sister. The child faded into the small plantation through which her mother had so often sped to her furtive assignations with the beautiful Oliphant boy and, indeed, dropped over the crumbling boundary wall at precisely that point where Papa had demanded, and Mama had so lushly conceded, their first kiss.

The track uphill was rough, a vestigial cart-road twisting and turning among boulders and past marshy places on its way to a mountainy croft-house that was now but a rickle of stones overgrown with nettles. This in due course joined another but more orderly road leading steeply towards that alluring skyline, and for a while the child was happy, enjoying the rustling companionship of small hazel and oak on one side and the fragrance of the bog myrtle among the stunted birches on the other.

She saw the white fuds of rabbits bobbing comically among tufts of grass and heather. Brown butterflies, strangely satisfying her feeling for gold as the *motif* of the enchanted afternoon, staggered from marsh orchis to the belated harebells of the uplands. A small colony of weasels crossed the road some fifty yards ahead of her, and she stopped to watch the miracle, only a little afraid and really more entranced by the hint of gold in their coats.

The time came, however, when Bluebell began to realise that she

had in fact reached the skyline and climbed so high that there were no more trees by the roadside, not even the friendly tufts of the bog myrtle. Looking back in faint alarm, she saw that the familiar plantations of Inverquey were out of sight now under the brow of the hill, and that the loch and the great outer Firth had ceased to be wildernesses of flat water and were more like patterns of dull glass set into an artificial arrangement of green cushions. A ship out beyond the Bell Buoy was a smut within a puff of smoke. At hand, a rising wind whistled over coarse upland grasses. Black-faced sheep raised their heads to stare at her, some of them petulantly tossing their horns, but even the sheep ignored a vagrant child in the long run and, returning to the business of feeding, left her feeling lonelier than ever and always a little more frightened.

Suddenly, the wind came blasting out of the Nor'-West, fickle as ever in West Scotland. Its first assault nearly carried the child off her feet and against the drystone wall of a sheep-fank. It cut at her with rain : great, heavy drops driven against the small, female body with the force of a half-gale. She cried in pain and panic, for now she was lost and disgraced, and started to run with the storm, but still uphill. It was in her confused mind that she might find shelter within the white walls of a group of farm buildings she could see in the distance.

Over another crest she rejoiced to discover that shelter was quite near at hand. Two hundred yards ahead stood a solid house by the roadside, its blue slates shining in the rain. It was a queer-looking L-shaped building, but smoke rose from its chimneys and a black dog barked at her from beside a stack of peats behind it. Bluebell hesitated, fearing both the dog and the task of asking for shelter, but as she stood in the roadway, a drenched, pathetic fragment of bewildered childhood, a woman came running out of the house, a mackintosh cape billowing about her and the black dog prancing cheerfully beside her. The woman seized Bluebell's hand.

" Mercy, child ! What on earth are you doing up here on a day like this ? You're soaked to the skin, poor bairn ! Come in to the fire at once."

She hurried Bluebell indoors, and as if to support the welcome the black dog caught the hem of his mistress's cloak in his mouth, blithely bent on helping them out of the storm.

They came into a small, warm kitchen, bright with firelight on crockery and burnished meat covers and pot lids. In an inglenook a baby slept in a cradle prettily decorated. Bluebell could have lingered over the infant, but she was ashamed of her dripping clothes, and her new hostess was peremptory.

" Off with every stitch of clothing you've got," she ordered, " and we'll get you dried first. Then a hot bath. Then tea."

Bluebell at ten had had the prudery of the period imposed upon her, and she hesitated, blushing a little. But there was a smile on this small woman's pale face and a friendly tolerance in her eyes.

"Wrap yourself in that," she said, taking a great plaid of shepherd tartan from a hook on the door. "I'll go and run the bath for you."

Hot water about her body eased the ache out of her limbs and warmed the soul of Bluebell. This was an intimacy of kindness she had never known in all her life before, except perhaps with Bridget; here with this unusual stranger, of perhaps her own mother's age or just a little more, was perfect safety. Soon she was sitting before the kitchen fire, wrapped in an amusing variety of woollen garments under the plaid, while her own clothes steamed on a frame beside her and her hostess laid the kitchen table.

"You're the little girl from Inverquey, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Bluebell Oliphant."

"My name is Bell, Mrs. Calum Bell. My husband will be in shortly. He's working out at the back somewhere. He's a sailor, the captain of a big ship."

"I never knew there was a house here," said Bluebell, adding innocently: "Of course, I am not allowed out alone. I'm only allowed to play inside the policies."

"Well, you've come far enough to-day, Bluebell!" her friend laughed. "Yes, it's a queer house to be up here in the wilds. It used to be the schoolhouse for the district, you see, and I was the schoolmistress. Then they closed the school, and I got married, and I rented it from the Board—well, because I liked it and had been very happy here. Of course, it's only our holiday house, for week-ends and when my husband's at home. I'm really a busy, working woman though you mightn't think it. I'm away in Mallig most of the week, running a restaurant of my own."

"That must be very interesting," said Bluebell politely.

"It is. Would you like to come and see my place some day?"

"I'd like to very much. But I am putting you to so much trouble already!"

"Trouble! My dear child!" and Bluebell could not understand why the little woman with the kind eyes laughed so heartily. "But there's himself coming in for his tea."

The door opened, and Bluebell saw Captain Bell as a small, slight but square man with a freckled, friendly face. She liked his double-breasted blue serge suit. His handshake surprised her by its firmness.

"Calum, this is Bluebell Oliphant," said the hostess, making the proper introduction. "Bluebell, this is my husband, Captain Bell."

"The bells are ringing everywhere, aren't they?" the sailor joked a little awkwardly. "And this is a fine adventure for you, young lady,

I must say. Yes, I knew your father in the old days. I could even tell you how you came to be called Bluebell. . . ."

"Sit down at the table, everybody!" commanded Mrs. Bell hastily. "Don't worry about those coronation robes of yours, Bluebell. Pick up your skirts and hop into the nearst chair. And now my precious babe has come to life."

The infant in the cot declared his importance with a howl that degenerated into a grizzling whimper, but a crust of toast thrust into a fat hand quietened him. Sucking the crust as if it were a cigar, he took to grinning and crowing and kicking so cheerfully that Bluebell could hardly get on with her meal for the pleasure of looking at him.

"Teething," explained Mrs. Bell. "They like something to chew on. But he's a nice baby, is my Roderick."

The simplicity of this statement enchanted Bluebell. In her own great home, staffed with servants, babies were either hidden away or elaborately exhibited in flowing garments; they were either publicly petted by their parents or obscurely left to the maids. This calm intimacy of the small house was new and surprising. The mere physical proportions of the kitchen in this old schoolhouse were as alluring as those of any doll's house, with the fire and the table and the cooking utensils and the baby in his cradle all in one warm, close grouping. It was remarkable to the little girl from the big house that her hostess was apparently her own nursemaid, cook, housemaid and tablemaid and was yet decidedly what Bluebell had been taught to call "a lady."

Even more delightfully novel was the ease of the talk over the table: no scolding, no patronage, no teasing, no rawness at all of intercourse. These people were freer somehow than the people at home, calmer, easier. If she could have put a word to it, she would have said that these new friends respected other people as they did themselves. It was years, however, before she was able to analyse the profound sensations of that significant hour at Maambeg, and in the moment she was merely happy, talking more than she had talked in a fortnight beforehand.

"And now, Bluebell," said her hostess at length, "we'll have to get you dressed and home again. What do you think, Calum?"

"I'd best take her down the hill," said Captain Bell with the delightful little lilt of the Highlands in his voice. "There may be a letter for me at the Post, and I could do with an ounce of tobacco. This rain is on for the night."

"I've an old mac we can rig her up in somehow. The child's nearly as tall as I am—aren't you, Bluebell?"

"I'm afraid I am putting you to far too much trouble," said

Bluebell demurely—and wondered again why Mrs. Bell should laugh so heartily at a perfectly simple, polite remark.

"You're a caution!" she cried kindly. "Now, Calum. . . . Here are all your things, Bluebell, as dry and warm as toast. I'll clear away while you put them on."

Soon she was all ready to go, a comic enough figure little in a woman's coat caught up by a leather strap round her middle, and suddenly she wanted to cry. It was not only that she must miss the spectacle of Roderick in his evening bath; it was the necessity to leave new but trusted friends in their warm, secure circle and go back to the vastnesses and lonelinesses of Inverquey. The dreadful thing was that Mrs. Bell seemed distant in her words of parting.

"I hope we may see you again, Bluebell. If you are ever passing this way. . . . Not at all! Any decent body would surely take a tinker in on a day like this."

And Bluebell had wanted her to say that she was to come up again to-morrow and every day thereafter! Then it was a little awkward walking down the road with Captain Bell since, as she could guess even then, he was a shy man and not used to talking to little girls. However, they came to a place where field-drains had choked and water flooded a whole stretch of the track where it dipped into a fold in the uplands.

"Hallo!" he cried mock-ruefully. "Here's the Flood with a vengeance, and us wanting an Ark! You'll have to be Sindbad the Sailor, and I'll be the Old Man of the Sea. Let me carry you, Bluebell. Up, up! There's a girl."

His arms were strong, and she felt secure against his shoulder; and when they were through the flooded bit he continued to carry her, saying lightly that she must be tired, and that she was as light as a feather, and that it was not often he had such a fine girl in his arms. Thus their conversation became ever so much more fluent and friendly, and Bluebell rightly concluded that it was not so very far from Inverquey to the schoolhouse of Maambeg as it had seemed when she had gone out searching for gold, alone.

He set her down only when they were under the dripping trees on the borders of the Inverquey policies.

"You will come in and see Mama, won't you?" said Bluebell politely, as she had been taught. "I'm sure she would like to thank you for your kindness."

Captain Bell let out a great guffaw at that, then corrected himself hastily.

"No, no, dear!" he said with kind urgency. "We've been playing truant, you and I, and I think we'd best slip in the back and have a word with Kirsty Macbean first of all."

Bluebell was a little mystified to find herself smuggled, as it were, in among the outhouses and through the scullery into the kitchen. She was much more mystified to hear nice Captain Bell and Kirsty confer in urgent Gaelic over her head. Then Ellen the nursemaid came storming into the kitchen and whirled her away, before she had time to thank Captain Bell properly, up the back-stairs and into the nursery. Ellen was angry as Bridget never would have been.

"And where have *you* been? You've had me in a right stew since teatime. Look at those clothes of yours—fair ruined with the rain. Wait till I tell your mother!"

The granddaughter of Iron Jock Gillanders, one of the Oliphants of Garvel, lifted a stubborn chin and defied a nurserymaid.

"I left the house long before teatime. I've had a lovely afternoon with friends. I'll tell Mama all about it. You needn't worry."

"You take these clothes off and get into a bath at once——"

"I have had a bath."

"You'll go to bed, then. That's the place for you!" The poor girl, trapped in the net of her own sins of omission, was floundering in face of the child's cold and stolid resistance. "And I'll have something to say to your mother. You're more of a nuisance than all your brothers put together."

Then Mama came up, still in her outdoor clothes, not angry but in a state of nervous alarm.

"O, Bluebell! Wherever have you been? What on earth took you up there and into that house! Promise me, promise me faithfully, that you won't say a word to your father. If Papa knew you had been mixing with these people he would be terribly angry."

"But why, Mama? They were very kind to me."

"Never mind. Just you forget all about it. Promise me!"

So Bluebell gave her promise, and Mama herself brought up a glass of milk and sweet biscuits before she kissed her good night.

". . . It was a long time," said the grown-up Bluebell to the ageing Bridget, "before I discovered why my father disliked the Bells—because he was ashamed of what he had done to them. The vulgar mystifications that man imposed on everybody about him! The Bells were the real gentlefolk, not my own people. They have never mentioned it to me once!"

"It's an old story now," murmured Bridget.

"O, I've no bitterness left!" said Bluebell cheerfully. "It's what I'm trying to tell you, Bridgie—the two wonderful things that happened to me on that one day. Think of the kindly wisdom of that old man, my grandfather. They say he was hard in business, and ruthless, but he knew where a woman is weakest in life, and he saw the weakness

in my father. He made sure that I should have a little money of my own. He had his lawyer down from Glasgow next day. It came to me on my twenty-first birthday, and they can't touch it. I'm independent, Bridget, free to walk out and go my ways ! "

" That's just it," observed Bridget morosely.

" Then I made the best friend of all my life beside yourself, Bridget dear. It was from Betty Bell I got all I know of dignity and decency and patience and, yes ! the real gentility—what I could never have got in this house, stuffed with all the money in the world."

" She is a fine woman is Mrs. Bell," Bridget allowed.

" Yes, my old grandfather and little Betty Bell. . . . What they really did for me," Bluebell concluded on a burst of illumination, " was to cast out fear. I'll never be afraid any more. Do you hear me, Bridgie ? I'll never be afraid any more. And such a long time it took to escape ! "

4

It was in herself as a little girl, that fear. She watched and brooded too much ; she was so much alone. Bridget, Mama and the women servants were ostensibly always about her, but that society, as of the harem, was restricted and apprehensive as against the free, external life lived by Papa in his power and then, as they grew up, by the Boys. She seemed to live indoors, in the darker half of a house divided.

The queerness of life ! As she argued to Bridget so many years later, the larger influences on the individual are not always, not necessarily, those that spring from the high moments of drama : from the ostensible griefs or the moments or exaltation. Life is apt to come at you obliquely, its purposes or accidents subtly disguised. The adult Bluebell could wryly amuse herself by reflecting that the life of the Oliphants in Agincourt began to fall apart openly when Papa became an officer in the Rifle Volunteers.

That was merely conventional in a gentleman of his position. Though Papa assumed his military duties at a relatively late age, the act was, like joining a good club, an automatic step along the road worn by generations now of the best people in provincial society. You joined the Rifle Volunteers, the Heavy Battery, or the Submarine Miners ; a corps which, in Garvel, wore a halo of dangerous mystery since it was believed to have, by pressing a button at any moment, the power of blowing up every ship at the anchorage in one splendid explosion.

Being engineers of sorts, however, suspiciously near the artisan class, the Submarine Miners were a trifle suspect in the social sense.

The Heavy Gunners were also faintly tainted with the mechanical odours, and theirs was a small Mess at the best. It was deemed fitting that "one of our leading citizens, of a House foremost in all that pertains to the prosperity and advancement of Garvel for a century past"—as the *Courier* put it in announcing the appointment—should take his proper position among gentlemen of his own rank in the 1st County Battalion of Rifle Volunteers, originally formed to deny Boney access to the sacred shores. The authorities recognised Mr. Oliphant's unique position in the community by granting him a commission as full lieutenant without any preliminary nonsense of drill, examination or interview.

The event delighted the womenfolk in Agincourt. It was an occasion when, on winter nights, Papa appeared in his regimentals to go on company parade at the Drill Hall or, on summer evenings, to take part in a ceremonial muster of the full battalion at the Customs Park. He cut a fine figure, they thought, in his tartan trews and white spats, his red doublet and voluminous plaid, the fine face, now embellished by a ripe-blonde moustache, set off by a cap with fess-checky braiding. No housemaid in Agincourt was ever loth to spend an afternoon polishing the buttons and buckles of the Master's uniform. Bluebell delighted specially in the splendid claymore that was his most spectacular symbol of rank: a shining blade in a trailing scabbard, its elaborate basket-hilt adorned with red silken tassels.

The supreme day of the military year was that of the Annual Inspection. So great was the occasion, so high Papa's pride in being a prominent figure in the display, the carriage-and-pair was ordered out, and Mama, the Boys and Bluebell, with Bridget in attendance, were driven down to the Customs Park.

The Oliphant turn-out, with its yellow wheels, its two glossy bays, its statuesque coachman and groom, was invariably given pride of place beside the saluting base, and from that point of vantage the women and children beheld what seemed to them very wonderful sights. The battalion, led by its kilted and beribboned pipers, marched and counter-marched in formidable columns of fours, the Cyclist Company trailing behind, seeming like so many mongrels nosing hopefully after a pack of borzois. Then the gallant thousand, smart in obedience to awful words of command, changed its shape in the most fascinating way and, after an intricate series of small-arms exercises, started splendidly to move forward in column of companies in line—"a very difficult manœuvre," Papa had already informed the family tea-table.

Now it was the turn of the brass band to blast forth *The Garb of Old Gaul*. There was Papa on the right flank of B Company marching as steady as a rock, the shining blade of his claymore gleaming and

upright at the end of a stiff forearm. The Inspecting Officer, who might be the Lord-Lieutenant himself, stood motionless on his dais, his hand at the salute, as if petrified by the impact of so much beauty in strength. It was a pity if old Colonel Petrie, not a masterful horseman at the best, startled his hired mount by the raucousness of his commands on such a wide and open field and was carried backwards into the leading file of A Company, but that small, familiar incident was quickly forgotten when the battalion, its accoutrements brilliantly lighted by the sun westering over the Firth, cast aside ceremonial and settled down to the grim business of forming squares to receive cavalry.

Bluebell carried in her mind throughout her life that romantic picture out of a splendid and confident period : yes, splendid, even if the adult humours and dissillusionments could all too easily riddle the assumptions on which its ceremony was based and discern in those antics of the late 'nineties a tragic-comic complacency. They remained particularly bright in her mind, however, because they were the glittering contrasts in a child's understanding to a drab fear that clouded her spirit for two years on end and to the wholly inglorious and all-too-intimate picture of a beloved person suffering, dying.

She had not noticed, though she saw it clearly in retrospect, how Mama had begun to change after the birth of her fifth child and fourth son, Tristram. The truth pounced on her like a panther out of the darkness when, as so often in her childhood, the lonely trick of hanging about and listening and watching carried her into premature encounters with the griefs and stresses that seemed to be so frequent in the lives of grown-ups.

This time the child, slipping out of her bed in the darkness to fetch a book she had left in the bathroom and felt she must have for the morning, was halted in the darkened upstairs passage by a terrible sobbing from the nursery. She was frightened, and she was also appalled to think that a great grief should have befallen Bridget. She hesitated by the half-open door and was more terrified than ever by what she saw.

It was Mama who was sobbing so bitterly. She knelt on the floor at Bridget's feet, her head in her servant's lap, and Bridget was stroking the bowed, convulsive head and saying just such soothing things as she would say to one of this unhappy woman's children in pain.

"There, dear ! Now, now ! We mustn't frighten the children."

"But it's so terrible, Bridget ! I know I'll never be able to sleep again." The muffled voice was that of one defeated. "I know it will kill me, this awful pain."

"Now, now ! " said Bridget again more peremptorily, in that

clipped, practical way she had when she wanted to take a short cut out of an emotional complexity. "You've got to get the doctor in and be done with it. You've got to tell the Master to take you to a specialist. If you won't, I will—first thing in the morning, too!"

"No, no, no!" cried Mama. "But it's so sore, Bridget, so sore. Here. There was just a wee lump at first, but now——"

She pressed her left hand, with all the glittering rings on the plump, white fingers, against her belly above the groin.

Bluebell ran for her room on bare tiptoes, dived into her bed and covered her head with the clothes. She sobbed much as she had heard Mama sobbing, out of pity for Mama and pity for herself and sheer unhappiness in the apparent impossibility of her little world to go smoothly and kindly as it did in the story books and as she herself most passionately wished it to do. What kept her long awake, however, was simply terror, the terrible recollection of and re-living through that moment of time in which she had seen Papa strike Mama with his angrily clenched fist.

Next morning Bridget led her into Mama's bedroom, and now Bluebell saw what pain and illness had done to the pretty, familiar face without her having noticed it. Mama had been plump, tending to fat, with bright colour in her cheeks, and now the child saw that the cheeks had lost flesh and lustre, and that the eyes, once so warm with kindness, were dull within shadows. Even Mama's voice had gone thin and distant, and with it she asked her only daughter funny little detached questions without seeming to listen to the answers. Was she being a good girl? Was she sticking into her lessons? And Bluebell could only utter a polite, "Yes, Mama," while she passionately wanted to be fluent and intimate in her terrible concern.

A carriage came up the drive, and they heard the door-bell clang on its coiled spring in the distant kitchen.

"That will be the doctor," said Bridget.

She tidied Mama's bed with a few deft jerks of her hand, then held it out to Bluebell, saying gently, "Come, dearie!" Bluebell stooped to kiss Mama dutifully, and suddenly the sick woman's arm was tight round her neck, pressing her face into the bosom that had suckled her; and the child knew the intensity of fear and love the embrace was seeking to express. But she managed to hold back her tears until she was out in the passage again.

She sat alone and idle in her nursery, listening. Every sound within the house was portentous—the feet on the stairs, the opening and closing of the sickroom door. Bridget emerging to tell the nursery-maid to fetch a ewer of hot water; and the silence that followed was worse. Then the door opening again at length, and the doctor bidding his patient a professionally cheerful farewell, and then the really

ominous rumble of men's voices in the Library : the doctor telling Papa the no doubt dreadful truth about Mama's condition.

That afternoon, after the nursery tea, Papa had the children brought down. He was in his fidgety, unreasonable mood, and he paced the hearthrug while he addressed the dutiful parade of infants arrayed in line before him, and the merciless eye of Bluebell noticed that he did not look into the innocent faces.

" Children," he began, " I have very serious news for you. Mama is ill, perhaps dangerously ill. We'll hear when the specialist comes down from Glasgow to-morrow. It may mean an operation."

At this little Rupert, a soft and petted child, began to cry loudly while Bluebell perceived that Papa was rather enjoying the impressive moment and being really a little ridiculous. He turned on Rupert in that unreasonable, angry way of his.

' Stop that blubbering, child ! " he commanded. " That's what I've got you all down here for—to warn you that there must be absolute quiet in the house. No romping about the place and shouting, or I'll know the reason why. Do you understand ? "

" Yes, Papa ! " the shrill chorus assured him.

Suddenly this incalculable man melted and became of the same frail humanity as his little children. Bluebell found herself held tightly for a moment and kissed, the blonde moustache prickly on her skin. He kissed the boys in turn, and he was sniffing as, with encouraging pats of his right hand on the child's shoulder, he urged the now abandoned Rupert to the door. All the Oliphant children were crying as they crossed the hall in dismal procession and, clinging to the banisters, made their way up the main staircase to their remote premises on the top floor.

The house and its inmates were held for weeks thereafter in that cold, hushed state of emergency which falls with the shadow of the wings of the angel of death. It was all very sombre, yet fascinating to such a child as Bluebell, in its revelation of the complexity of living outside the fortalice of Agincourt. There was the exciting business of getting the telephone installed in case of emergency. The children hung open-mouthed about the workmen and, when the job was done, would creep downstairs to gape at the magic box on the wall and marvel that, by the mere turning of the handle and the repetition of numbers, Papa could talk to people at the other end of the town, shouting " Hullo ! " continually and sometimes getting very angry with the machine, which became " a damned contraption " in such moments of passion.

There were the Specialists, one after the other, grave silk-hatted, frock-coated men from Glasgow and even one from distant and fabulous Edinburgh, each with his gold pince-nez swinging from a

black silk ribbon. There was always the hush in the house, Bridget occupied with Mama most of the day, and the feeling of a new loneliness, hardly mitigated by the formal evening visit to Mama's listless bedside.

Then there fell the cold but exciting moment of decision, though it reached the children only through the nurserymaid's gossip, that a compartment had been booked for Mama in the Glasgow train, that an ambulance would be coming to the house next day, and that Mama was being taken away to a place called Nursing Home. (She had them round her bedside that evening and bade them sing her favourite humn, *Now the day is over*, which they did in unhappy and uncertain chorus.) They were herded into the nursery when the ambulance came on a morning of slashing rain. They heard the horse clop-clopping away along the street. Mama had been taken away, and they all wept.

The next day, dark and depressing with squalls of sleet from the nor'-west and chilly draughts whistling even under the solid doors of Agincourt, was that of the Operation, but Bluebell was to remember long afterwards how Bridget, now back in charge of the nursery, had deceived them all into fancying it was really some sort of special holiday, so devising games and treats and surprises that the unknown terror was forgotten save in occasional moments of solitude. Then Papa came back in the evening and had them all down in the Library.

The decanter and siphon were on the table. He was genial, even garrulous. He did not kiss them this time, but chucked them under the chin and pulled Bluebell's hair and told them that, while Mama had been very, very ill that day and he, Papa, had endured extreme anxiety, Mama was going to get well again and would be home soon. Speeding the infants upstairs, he jovially presented each of them with a quarter-pound of chocolate peppermints in a little bag of crisp, white paper with a thin band of elastic tautly and delightfully binding it lengthwise.

On their happy way upstairs the children paused and then crouched in the right Red Indian manner to listen while Papa buzzed the handle of the telephone with fierce mutterings of "Hell!" and "Damnation!" quarrelled with the operator, and at length was bawling happily to his old friend Bill Hercus, telling him that the Missus was as right as a trivet now, and that he would be along at the Mess about eight o'clock without fail.

Papa was always going along to the Mess; or that at all events was Bluebell's impression in her maturity. There always seemed to be drills, regimental dinners, Mess Committee meetings, whist drives in the Sergeants' Mess or the Corporals' Mess, to be attended. There

were camps in summer, and a mysterious exercise called Staff Rides, and Musketry, and Courses.

Even when Mama came back from the nursing home after the Operation, a tired creature with a wan smile and something like a limp, Papa had to be out most nights; and when there was a big function connected with the absorbing affairs of the Rifle Volunteers it was assumed, of course, that poor Mama could not go with him.

A sentimental legend developed around Mama's invalidism and Papa's misfortune in being deprived of a gracious spouse in the social moments of his military career. Even as a child, however, Bluebell was aware of the household dividing into two separate, firmly hostile elements: the females rallying round the tottering figure of Mama while the always powerful patriarch went his own ways. As an adult she despised and yet a little pitied her father for his inability to live with the defeated and endure the ties thus imposed upon him in common decency. She could never forgive him that night when, within a week of Mama's return from the nursing home, the household was disturbed by a brawling of Papa and his cronies up the gravelled drive, and then by a prolonged clinking and even smashing of glass in the Library, by gusts of daft male laughter, and then by the silly shouting and singing of drunken men homing only when the artisans of Garvel were stirring for another day of labour in the shipyards to the drab imperative of the alarum clock.

5

Some thousands of miles away, meanwhile, there was developing to the point of explosion a clash of races, jealous like mongrels across a juicy bone, over the riches in gold and diamonds of a Continent into which neither had ever had the slightest moral right of entry. Since both nations were of the Reformed Faith, piously evangelical and apt to be literal in their readings of Holy Writ, the conflict was perhaps all the more bitter.

The moral indignation of such as Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant over the impertinence of those damned Boers was both profound and sincere. Dammit! hadn't the British Army had enough trouble in Egypt and the Sudan putting a lot of confounded fuzzy-wuzzies in their places and, at the expense of the British taxpayer, convincing them that they ought to live an equable, respectable sort of life and enjoy the benefits of British civilisation. No sooner was that job done than a damned Frenchman had the nerve to occupy Fashoda; thank God we had men like Kitchener to send such rascals packing!

Now a confounded old Boer with a silly fringe of whiskers round

his stupid face thought he could push us out of South Africa, did he? The Frogs and that dashed ass of a German Emperor, even if he was the old Queen's grandson, thought they could grin and actually support this old rascal Kruger with arms, did they? It was too damned bad, and that was where they made their big mistake. Julius had no great use for those writing chaps, but this chap Kipling had the right idea. How did it go now?

Hands off o' the sons o' the Widow,
Hands off o' the goods in her shop,
For the Kings must come down an' the Emperors frown
When the Widow at Windsor says "Stop!"

It went with quite a swing that poem; and this chap Kipling was right again in that one about "Duke's son, cook's son"—how did it go now? The point was that the British were solid behind Joe Chamberlain in refusing to stand any nonsense. If a rabble of Boer farmers with not a proper uniform among them thought they could defy the British Army they were going to get a pretty sharp lesson, and that canting old rascal, Oom Paul or whatever the devil they called him, would damned soon find himself up against a wall in front of a firing squad.

Bluebell, brooding over the fire after his funeral, perceived how subtle and important were the effects of the South African War upon Papa, driving him ultimately into action fateful beyond any calculation of which he was capable. It was as if Papa, like the old imperial conception of dominion over palm and pine, was at his most exuberant and decisive in 1901 or thereabouts and thereafter tended, though ever so slowly, to fall back into an autumnal complacency. . . .

But that was to impose acquired knowledge and experience upon her fragmentary memories of actual events. In one mood, smiling at the self-centred simplicity of childhood, she could see a rather pretty but very grave girl-child for whom the War meant mainly the pages of an illustrated weekly called the *Black-and-White Budget* and, still more fascinating, a series of cards issued with each packet of a cigarette delightfully called Ogden's Guinea Gold. (These she got from Pettigrew the groom, from the stableboys and, through the household servants, from a sycophantic variety of their "young men.")

The former, which Papa "took in" and allowed to go up to the nursery and then down to the kitchen when he was finished with it, provided Bluebell with many pleasing pictures of troops in their khaki uniforms and pith helmets, and sometimes kilts, embarking for Table Bay in a Union-Castle liner; of armoured trains puffing across an expanse of arid country called the Veldt; of shabby, bearded men

in slouch hats and bandoliers over their morning coats who were called Prisoners of War though their appearance suggested to the child-mind so many church elders on a poaching expedition.

The cards made up for the child a still more entrancing gallery of the portraits of heroes with sometimes funny names—Sir Redvers Buller (who looked rather like a walrus, if the truth could be told), General Gatacre, a somewhat bleak-visaged old gentleman with the plain name of Sir George White, a much more alert and handsome soldier with the delightful surname of Pole-Carew, and an eager and birdlike face that answered to the name of Baden-Powell—" a splendid chap," said Papa when he was laying down the law about the campaign.

Papa often laid down the law about the campaign. His profound and now professional interest in it as a Volunteer brought his children into closer contact with him than they had ever enjoyed before. Papa was specially insistent that the Boys should understand what was afoot in those distant places with the delightful names—Natal, the Orange Free State, the Transvaal. He had maps pinned up on the vacant spaces of the Library walls, and on frequent afternoons, when he was in the mood, he would have the small platoon of infants marched down from the nursery after tea and discourse to them on the progress of events in those distant parts : often in military language which poor Bluebell, for one, found difficult to follow. Sometimes young Rupert, the soft one of the family, would start weeping loudly, terribly anxious but quite unable to understand what Papa was talking about ; and Papa would lose his temper and dismiss them all with a passionate, blustering dressing-down of stupidity and even treason.

At the age of nearly thirty Bluebell thought she knew what had irked Papa during those winter days at the turn of the century. Not for the life of her could she recall his mood or that of the household during the Black Week of December, 1899, when the British Army appeared to be a tragic aggregation of blundering oafs in the face of those Dutch farmers, now revealed to be mobile in an almost caddish way and deadly shots with their smokeless cartridges and German guns. Papa could always pooh-pooh a set-back and bluster about the sharpness of the lesson those Boers, dirty fighters every one of 'em, were to be taught, but his daughter, grown up, knew that his confidence was a façade behind which the real Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant was afraid, subconsciously apprehending at least the beginning of a crack at the foundations of all the assumptions on which his life was based.

Then there was always the trouble about Mama. Hardly middle-aged as yet, Mama was now an invalid and had fully accepted the

burdens and privileges of that condition. With the wasting of her face and figure there had come, as it were, a thinning of her blood and spirit. She complained often of her sad and useless state, but more often she found the part of the patient long-sufferer more impressive, and she developed an effective technique of shaking her head with a sad resignation and in a trembling whisper deploring the fact, even in the presence of the children, that she could not now be long for the world. She was often to be seen, in the public rooms of Agincourt, at least, with the Bible rather than a novel on her lap. She liked to have the children sing the more cloying pieces in the Church Hymnary.

The dilemma was complete. You could not be angry with Mama, for Mama was really ill : every bit as ill as she declared herself to be. Bluebell sometimes wondered in later years that even Papa showed so few signs of impatience, but by then she had come to realise that his absorption in the progress of the war was not the whole reason for his almost nightly attendance at the Drill Hall and the Mess, for his frequent prolonged absences at Camps and Courses. Mercilessly she had perceived his need to escape, not so much from Mama in person, as from the discomforts and deviations from custom it was not in his uneasy spirit to abide.

She never came to know by what processes of reasoning or emotion he convinced himself—or Mama, for that matter—that he should make his final and successful bid for escape. It was announced to the children as an exciting triumph, and for a while they were immensely proud of Papa and impressed by the range of his spirit.

Papa was going out to fight the Boers in South Africa ! Papa was going to lead the first Garvel contingent in the Active Service Company of Volunteers now being formed at Stirling Castle. If that were not enough, the gallant lads from the Rifle Volunteers were to be regimented with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and to wear the brave green kilt and ornate insignia of that glorious regiment.

All of a sudden Papa became happy and busy, even jolly and friendly with the children and the servants. He loved to explain the onerous and picturesque nature of his new responsibilities.

" Got to run through to Edinburgh to-morrow and see if I can pick up some more equipment—bandoliers and spats," he would announce. " It's a devilish job fitting out these chaps for active service, and it's going to cost me a pretty penny, I can tell you. Can any of you tell me where I can pick up a dozen mess-tins ? No, I don't suppose you can. Ah, well ! That's another problem for me."

Papa did not exaggerate the cost of patriotism in the days when proud Britain had only a handful of Dutch farmers to fight. The Government might call for gallant Volunteers to come and help in

teaching those low-class upstarts a lesson, but the War Office, inveterately thinking in terms of its last phase of activity and chronically ill-prepared in mind and equipment to face a new variant of the martial theme, could not spare those mere civilian warriors the tools of their unfamiliar trade.

Simple British citizens, proud of their heritage, dipped their hands in their pockets and created funds to equip their sons for battle, buying in a rising market. It was considered a fine thing in Garvel that (as the *Courier* put it) "our esteemed and open-handed citizen, Mr. Julius W. I. Oliphant, always heart-whole behind every endeavour of charity or patriotism, has, to use a vulgarian, "footed the bill" for the not inconsiderable cost of equipping the gallant Garvel boys of the 1st Active Service Company he is, in person, to lead into battle against the Queen's enemies on the sun-baked plains of far South Africa."

Such was the mood of the moment. When Garvel's first contingent marched from the Drill Hall to the Mid Station to entrain for the Castle, the handsome figure of Papa at its head behind the pipes and drums of the battalion band, it passed through frenzied mobs of school children released for the day, the fluttering Union Jacks creating the effect of a coloured snowstorm. The Oliphant children stood beside the Provost at the door of the Municipal Buildings as the gallant Highlanders marched past at the salute and a brass band in the portico of the Mid Kirk, the instruments gleaming in pale January sunlight, competed with the jangle of bells from the steeple above, and they were proud and happy to see their father go so splendidly to the wars, all the people applauding, precisely as they might have been to see him lead in a Derby winner.

"An historic occasion!" kind old Provost Kemp kept assuring them, anxious to assuage grief which none of them felt in fact; and perhaps he spoke more truly than he knew of this first public admission in the tight, little, prosperous island, the private property of the dear old Queen, that war is apt to be the concern of more than the professional soldier.

A vague sorrow did assail the child called Bluebell when she saw the column disappear behind the Linen Bank corner, a vortex of loud citizens whirling in, like water under a boat's counter, to march behind it. She had a faintly sad, slightly sweet feeling of distance and separation and sacrifice; and there flashed across her memory a picture in the *Black-and-White Budget* of a stony mound in South Africa with the body of a British soldier, in huge, hob-nailed boots, asprawl upon it.

Africa was to have the bones of four of those who marched away from Garvel that day. A sniper got one at dawn near Nelspruit, and

three died in their beds of enteric. As for Papa, he was safely home again before midsummer.

Bluebell was never able to determine precisely how long Papa had sojourned in Africa or what of active service under fire he had seen, if any. The subject remained delicate for the eighteen years of life that were left to him. For herself as a child the image of Papa and the splendid fact of his absence on military service were almost completely erased by the sudden, bleak tragedy of Mama's death.

That episode was all the more desolate for its remoteness. It was largely Bridget's doing, but the children hardly knew of the swift onset of new agonies, of the shifts to get her away to Glasgow by a late train, of her death on the operating table next morning, until an almost strange Uncle John, alarmingly like his dead father, Iron Jock, appeared to break the news with a chill, lawyer-like precision. They did not even bring Mama home to Agincourt but buried her quietly off the train, attended in death by a few invited friends and servants and by grave men of her father's people. Her children got near to her only when Bridget took them up in the carriage to see the grave in the hilltop cemetery and the battered daffodils and jonquils of the wreaths.

The cable must have been waiting for Papa at Capetown. He was home with his children by June, to their great content, for they had been lonely and lost awhile. It was a different Papa from him who had marched off for the Front at the head of the Garvel Volunteers. He was quieter now ; fretful rather than explosive ; worried a little and a lone pacer of the Library floor till all hours ; sometimes open in rather embarrassing displays of grief and sentiment, as when he summoned the children and reduced them all to tears of sorrow and gladness mingled by announcing that he had decided to set aside a considerable sum of money for the erection of a church in memory of dear Mama.

A man abashed? A man even a little ashamed during those summer weeks of the century's first war? Bluebell was more diverted in after years to recall and piece together her own and Bridget's memories of the process of his recovery of the old ebullience.

There was the evening when, with almost childish pride and pleasure, he had Bluebell down to read out to the Boys in his presence a long piece in the *Courier* about the service of the Volunteers in South Africa, which included a feeling passage on the tragic circumstance that had forced their original and gallant leader, now Captain Julius Oliphant, to resign his command on the very eve of the advance on Pretoria under Lord Roberts.

Soon enough he was shedding his reticence in the matter of South Africa. He was foremost on the platform to welcome the survivors

of the first contingent of Volunteers on their return from their tour of duty overseas, and he was there to speed each batch of reinforcements. The phrase "invalided out," casually dropped into his reminiscences, suggested the drift of a venial self-deception.

A legend was in the making. Bluebell was fated to watch it grow into a series of stock reminiscences, beginning "When I was in South Africa . . . in command of the first Active Service contingent, you know. . . ."

Then one evening, not long after the old Queen's death, he surprised Bluebell in the nursery when she sat alone with her beloved *Davy and the Goblin*. He had been drinking, she perceived, but he was genial and tender, and he stroked her hair, saying:

"All alone, dearie? I don't like to see my little girl so much alone. I wonder if we shouldn't have a new Mama to look after us all."

By this time, however, Bill Hercus and father's other bachelor friends were coming about the house again, and the noises from the Library at midnight were apt to be louder than ever.

. . . And now those noises would never be heard again, reflected Bluebell, rising stiffly from her long session of thought in the chair before the fire in the old sewing-room. Papa was dead and buried, his follies with him, and the Boys in the West Room were spiritless without him. There would be no more high jinks in and about Agincourt while the Oliphants remained there; and, encountering this reflection as she was about to leave the room and switch off the light, Bluebell paused once more before the enormity of her personal problem.

But it was getting late. She closed the door of the little room behind her, shutting in the worries. She must go down and see Bridget again and forget herself in the small affairs of the household.

CHAPTER VI

A TOLLING OF BELLS

I

ONE JANUARY NOON, being then aged ten, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant was alone in the nursery at the top of the house, feeling unhappy in the patient way of childhood.

She had been told to read quietly and make no noise. They had put her into dark garments of the mourning sort. She knew that Papa had gone out with a band of crape round his arm to lead a company of Volunteers to the memorial service in the Mid Kirk. It had all been explained to her; and yet, a child alone—as she so poignantly remembered in after years—she was afraid of an unknown beyond the scope of her understanding.

When the bells of all the parish kirks in the town started to toll most solemnly, Bluebell started to cry in quiet distress and crept unhappily under the table, as if she could escape those plangent waves of metallic sound that swung over the roofs and spoke of death and doom. She was still on her knees under the table, her face hidden in her hands, when Bridget came to fetch her for midday dinner.

The bells tolled for the old Queen. It was incredible that she should be dead, and that a king was on the Throne.

"By God! It's like having a President," Papa had said, "though the Prince is a fine chap—a very fine chap. But my God! the old Queen! We'll never see the like of her again, mark my words."

He uttered a more profound historical truth than he knew, and the borrowed phrase did express the sense, creeping insidiously into the minds of the islanders that, what with the death of the old Queen and the turn of the century and the lack of smashing success in minor warfare, with this fellow de Wet still on the loose, the high summer of imperial certainty was over and the autumn at hand.

As if to stress the point of change, in the eccentric fashion of history, there sailed down the Firth from the builders' yard on a breezy day of the new century's first April a ship of an unusual sort.

She was but a pleasure-steamer, of no remarkable size or eccentricity of design in her hull, but shipbuilding and shipping men of more than one nation gathered on the shore of the northern estuary to watch her trials. She shaped a little strangely on that Firth, indeed, in being without side-paddles, such as mere pleasure craft had serenely relied

on since the days of the *Comet*, but the interest of the onlookers was in the mysterious machines that turned her screws. Four screws to drive a mere excursion boat! Did anybody ever hear the like of it?

The longshoremen of the estuary had talked for months on end about "the Turbine" until the phrase took on the validity of a given name. The ship had in fact, with the breaking of a bottle of good champagne, been duly christened *Princess Alexandra*, but a race of craftsmen, fascinated by a daring novelty, had transferred the generic to the first of a type. In esplanade shelters and public bars in the coastal towns, to which they had retired from the clangour of the up-river shipyards, veteran platers, rivetters, riggers and such hotly debated the possibilities of the Turbine. When the day came for her to slip down the ship-channel into deep water, the shores along some forty miles of coast were dotted with groups of elderly persons focusing her shape through telescopes and antique field-glasses; some admiring her speed through the water, others prophesying (and rather hoping) that she would blow up. The experts stood on the piers, seeming to hide within heavy overcoats, and watched, saying nothing.

The Oliphant children were witnesses of this little ship's historic appearance in tidal waters. Papa, who was surprisingly friendly with his young folk these days, had them all at the window of the upstairs drawing-room of Agincourt, whence over trees and the roofs of equally large villas on the hillside sloping steeply to the Esplanade, they looked down on the anchorage as on the floor of an amphitheatre.

Papa was at his most jocular, his gay manner implying that while the sight was one certainly to be seen by young people and the vessel's appearance a matter of some professional interest to a director of the London and West Scottish, it was not an occasion for awe or any weakening of the proper Oliphant attitude to pretentious novelty. When, however, the Turbine was suddenly to be seen in open water, putting on speed as she emerged from the ship-channel, the quick and honest observation of the little boys was not to be denied.

"Goodness, isn't she fast!" cried Ambrose. "Fairly scooting along!"

"She's like a little liner!" said Jerome in honest admiration.

"Now, now, boys!" Papa warned them tolerantly. "She's very neat and fast and all that, but she's just a cranky experiment. You and I will still be sailing in our good old L. and W.S. paddlers when she's gone and forgotten."

Still, the integrity of the innocent eye prevailed against Papa's superior knowledge, and the two elder Oliphant boys, at least, entranced, watched the vessel—so like a little liner, as Jerome had said, with her two funnels and the ample boat-deck abaft them—as she

slipped down the Firth with the smoothness of a silent projectile. Even Bluebell saw something to interest her.

"What are those colours on her funnels, Papa?" she asked innocently. "I've never seen them before."

"I don't know, and it doesn't matter," replied Papa crossly, and Bluebell realised that, once more, she had somehow contrived to say something that he did not want to hear. He was all brusque impatience again:

"Come along now, children! That's enough for to-day. Run along to the nursery. And," he added in a burst of petulance, "if you hear a bang, that's their precious Turbine blowing up."

That child Bluebell was a little pest sometimes. She had the damnedest trick, reflected her father as he went downstairs to the Library, of noticing the wrong thing and asking the wrong questions at the wrong moment.

He knew those colours on the funnels of the *Princess Alexandra* only too dam' well and didn't want to think about them. This Turbine business had been a confounded plague in his mind ever since that January meeting of the railway's directors in London. Eustace might really have remembered (thought Julius as he poured himself a drink) what he had come through—that South African business and all the expense, poor Flora's death, and a filthy bout of influenza on the top of it all.

Lord Alderford was in the chair that day, as usual. Eustace was growing old, his once suave features contracting wryly to give him the appearance of a remorselessly cynical Punch. The old boy was getting testy and eccentric, not to say incalculable. Now he was racing through the Minutes with a speed and allusiveness Julius found disconcerting, especially after a copious lunch in the company's new terminal hotel. Through a faint buzzing in his ears he heard the old man rap out an item in which Julius knew he ought to be interested.

"Report from the Marine Superintendent of Firth Steamers," Eustace read rapidly and as rapidly explained: "The usual formal report, gentlemen. Your fleet is in good order, all the boats laid off for the winter undergoing the usual overhaul. I think we take Mr. Gillespie's word for that?"

"Agreed. Agreed."

"Just one note in the report, however," Lord Aldeford hurried on. "Gillespie again mentions what we have all heard about before —this new steamer Barrie, Stewart's are building, engined with the Parsons turbine. It doesn't seem to be clear yet who's financing the venture. Even Gillespie doesn't appear to be willing to guess, and he's far too sensible a man to pass on rumours. Our legal department will, of course, be on the look out for any registration of a new company.

Meanwhile, the project is there, possibly affecting our considerable interests in the passenger traffic on the Firth, and perhaps our director on the spot, Mr. Oliphant, may have a word to say?"

The sharpening nose and the relentless eye of old Lord Alderford cocked themselves in the direction of Julius.

"Well, Mr. Chairman," said Julius, puffing a little and easing his chair back on its heels with his hands against the edge of the table: "I am really not, to be candid, in a position to give the meeting much information. As you know, Mr. Chairman—if I may say so—I was abroad for some months last year . . . in South Africa, in fact. . . ."

"Yes, yes! Proceed, Mr. Oliphant," Lord Alderford encouraged him drily.

"All I can tell the meeting," Julius proceeded a little too defiantly, "is that a lot of men on the spot, engineers and shipbuilders, have precious little faith in the turbine engine. For what it's worth, my own opinion is that it's a flash in the pan. A flash in the pan. But of course, Mr. Chairman, I've been rather out of touch, as I say. Then a personal grief has, well . . ."

"Quite."

The cold, cutting monosyllable stilled a murmur of sympathy from Julius's co-directors. Eustace, Lord Alderford, was all for the decencies of human intercourse, but now, when he looked at his distant relative and considered his worth and his record, he was aware of impatience, if not of bitterness. He thought of his only son, Mark, stretched out dead on the slopes of Majuba: the dear, flippant, charming, half-foreign rebel of ten years ago who had become an energetic, moustacheoed major of the Rifle Brigade and, as befitted the son of an English peer, had thrown his body and life against a hail of Boer bullets in a futile charge for the glory of an abstraction called Queen and Country. Emmy's only child, the single blossom of a romance—as against this lump of limitations who had dodged the death of a stupid wife and yet acquired the hero's halo. Life was really fantastic.

"Quite," Lord Alderford repeated in his capacity of chairman. "I think we should notice, however, that Mr. Gillespie's report takes the new turbine steamer quite seriously; and I must observe on my own account that I can't imagine Barrie, Stewart's backing—what was the phrase?—a flash in the pan. But Mr. Oliphant is on the spot, and we have other things to think of. Next business. . . . Accident at Higher Morningfield. Report from the District Engineer."

Alone in his big room in the villa called Agincourt Julius remembered that awkward brush with old Eustace; and now, dammit to hell, here was this confounded Turbine tearing down the Firth, and his own children exclaiming at the novelty, and—if you please—Calum Bell and that confounded wife of his behind the venture!

Gillespie had 'phoned him only the other day to say so. Not only that, but Barrie, Stewart's were backing them. It was all very well to assure the kids that the blasted ship was bound to blow up. Julius knew in his bones that the Turbine was not in the least likely to oblige him with such a glorious way of escape from his own rash commitments. And here on the table was the dashed intimation from the Secretary of the railway company, calling a Meeting of Directors for Wednesday week, with a draft Agenda, of which item No. 4 harshly promised : " FIRTH PLEASURE FLEET. Reports from Regional Director and Marine Superintendent *in re* turbine developments."

Julius stalked to the fireplace and agitated the lever of the bell-pull. His tug at the curved bit of decorative metal with its porcelain embellishments set up a satisfying clamour of bells in distant parts of the house and in decent time brought a trig parlourmaid to the door.

" I'll want an early lunch, Hannah," said Julius, now in full sway over his world. " Tell Cook to have it on the table at ten to, sharp."

" Yes, sir," responded Hannah, bobbing awkwardly.

It ought to be a nice afternoon, thought Julius, taking Bill Hercus's sister Kate across the Firth to see how Begbie's men were getting on with the job of preparing *Iolanthe* for the season. She was a nice girl, Kate : just the right age, and sensible ; no damn' nonsense about her.

2

Summer came again to the West. Rain, mist and storm might be the all-too-frequent lot of that wild countryside, but when the sun did shine it was with the perfection of a miracle. Unhappy as she was, hiding indeed among the bushes on the edge of the bay before the house of Inverquey, Bluebell thought that nothing could be lovelier than this arrangement of breezy blue skies above the hills and the riffled, sparkling waters of the loch. Already the young heather was beginning to insinuate a note of royal purple through the bronze-green of the steep hillside ; between the shore and the fluent lines of the steam yacht *Iolanthe* at her moorings a school of porpoises broke surface in cascades of rainbow spray.

Perhaps it was only her own discontent that prompted the child to observe and even analyse down to its elements the mocking loveliness of the sub-Highland scene. Sadness and anger did indeed possess her. It was in the happy, old order of things that the household should move in mid-June each year from the big villa in Garvel to the gentleman's coastwise mansion old Iron Jock had bought for himself near Ardhallow. The children had always been happy in the change;

the wild, free remoteness of Inverquey provided the sunniest hours of five young lives. Now, this summer, Inverquey was for Bluebell at least a misery.

Inverquey belonged to Mama : the house and the grounds about it were forever haunted by her fussy, indolent, creamy, untidy kindness. Bluebell did not know by what process it had apparently become wholly Papa's but nothing would convince her that the place was not still Mama's, sacred to the memory of Mama—if she could have compassed the phrase.

Now Papa had opened it to unfriendly strangers who could not know what the house had been in another age. Now he had some of his friends—especially Bill Hercus and Bill's sister Kate—staying with him for the Fortnight, and there was a lot of drinking and noise along the passages at night : strange yelps of male and female laughter and a great banging of doors, all as a sensitive child, who couldn't get Mama out of her mind, heard it from her room. There was the sorrow that Papa, so friendly through his first year as a widower, had withdrawn himself again into his queer grown-up world. He got terribly angry and unreasonable if the children made a noise or let themselves be seen when he did not want his friends to see them.

So Bluebell was in hiding among the tall bushes of buddleia Iron Jock, on a belated inspiration, had had planted round the rim of the bay. The bees were busy among the cloying flowers, but the child neither heeded nor feared them. She was watching, jealously. She saw the gig put off from the yacht, the sailors in white jumpers and white-topped caps as smart as the captain's crew from the guardship. She knew that square yards of teak grating along the bottom of the boat had been scrubbed almost white to receive Papa and his guests. Thus the gig used to come in to take Mama out to the yacht ; and now the procession coming down the gravelled path from the house to the jetty did not include her. Mama was up in Heaven.

This was a gayer, rougher party than Mama had ever entertained. The ladies of it, in costumes of cream serge or pure white *piqué*, were talkative ; " showing off " the child phrased it to herself, especially that hated one Papa had begun to insist the children should call Aunt Kate and Jerome, to the secret delight of the nursery, had nicknamed " the war-horse." Papa and Bill Hercus and their friends, in yachting caps, white trousers and gold-buttoned reefers, were like boys in the censorious eyes of the watching child, laughing and shouting —as if Mama were utterly forgotten, as if Mama couldn't see and hear all that was going on.

While Papa led his guests to the boat the sailors in it sat with their oars stiffly up-ended, the varnished blades glinting in the forenoon sun. At both bow and stern stood a hand in pure white ducks, holding

the gig from the jetty with boathooks of which the very bronze was polished to shine like gold. The business of handing the ladies into the sternsheets was of almost Elizabethan formality, and when the upright oars were lowered to the rowlocks and at a word of command the blades dug simultaneously into the green water, the movements had the precision of ceremonial drill.

Thus, in the earliest years of the twentieth century, did the Owner board his steam yacht and take his guests for a day on the Firth at the peak of the Fortnight, when all the great and lovely yachts of the world, millions of money in timber and canvas, in steel and coal and paint, in food and wine and wages, assembled in the northern estuary to furnish a picnic for the rich and fortunate and, be it admitted, a spectacle of glory for all.

Yes, the bells had tolled for the old Queen, a King was on the throne, and men of the Dutch and British races still died, though now in decreasing numbers, in that sad, old wrangle over the gold and diamonds of South Africa. The new century was now veritably in progress, and the world had not, after all, come to an end. The British people, though slightly dazed by the death of its figurehead and by the realisation that it was not in certain military circumstances invincible, had shaken itself like a man awakening from a nightmare and appreciated, with relief, that another bright day still lay ahead.

It was still a good world for the British peoples in the more secure orders of society. Didn't we still hold India, the Treaty Ports in China —all that sort of thing? In fact, the right sort of chap didn't think of that sort of thing at all. The thing a chap like Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant kept his eye on was this jolly good idea of planting rubber trees in the Straits Settlements. Old Eustace—my cousin, Lord Alderford, and as shrewd as you make 'em—had said that if this new motor-car idea was coming to anything (as it seemed to be, most definitely so !) then the demand for rubber must be heavy. Damn' clever and far-seeing, old Eustace, you had to admit. My cousin, of course.

So the oars flashed in the sunlight over a remote bay in Scotland as the Owner, with his prospective second wife tagging on to his arm, advanced down the jetty before Inverquey to board the gig that was to take them out to *Iolanthe*, that white swan lying at anchor : pure white with a bottom of emerald green, sitting pretty on the enamelled waters of the loch. Shrewd longshoremen said that it must cost Old Juley the best part of three thousand a year to keep her going.

" Here comes the stupid b—— and his new moll," observed the second engineer of the *Iolanthe* to the chief steward as, leaning over the rail amidships, they watched the gig start from the jetty. He spat overside and added with the bitterness common to engineers : " He'll want full steam ahead in the next five minutes, and to hell

with the coal bill! He's got to show off to her ladyship somehow, even if she has a face like the wrong end of a battleship."

"And I'll best get the drinks laid out," agreed the chief steward, turning with his colleague from the rail. "They can fair punish the booze, that lot."

Bluebell came out from her hiding-place in the thicket of buddleia and sped behind the screen of it towards the house. She had seen all that her morbidity had peremptorily bidden her to see—Papa forgetting Mama; Papa cheerful again and indifferent even to the Boys. Bluebell did not nowadays expect to be noticed much, but it was serious when Papa could wholly withdraw, and so suddenly, his interest in Mama's four sons.

It wasn't that woman. She was a big, masculine sort of spinster in her mid-thirties with a bold, mannish face; or so the children saw her She marched like a policeman, and her big feet splayed, and she was loud and facetious and generally awful when she was trying to be friendly with young people. But it wasn't that woman. It was Papa spending so much of his time with her, and forgetting Mama; Papa always laughing when she was there and jokey (as young Rupert phrased it), but not really caring a bit about what was left of the world he had shared with Mama.

Bridget took the head of the table at an early lunch for the children in the little breakfast-room old Iron Jock had always insisted on calling the Parlour. That was one of the blessings of the new order from Bluebell's point of view. You didn't have to listen to Papa laying down the law and demanding of everybody to know exactly how they proposed to spend the rest of the day. Bridget could be strict, but so long as you came back for meals at the right time and didn't do anything really silly you were free, and Bridget was content to look after Tristram, still a toddler. Bluebell saw that Bridget was no longer young, and she sometimes thought it a pity, now Mama was dead, that Bridget did not get married and have children of her own.

There was minced collops for lunch—Bluebell's favourite dish, for you could mix the mince with the potatoes and mashed turnips and make castles and forts on the plate—and Bridget was in a good mood: sharp only if you were guilty of a breach of what she called "your manners." She was really angry when Jerome, for fun and to show off, started eating his mince off the handle of his fork. "Stop that nonsense, Jerome!" she commanded sharply as Ambrose started to giggle at the antics of his younger brother; but then, having re-asserted her authority, she turned nice and comfortable again and asked them how they planned to spend the afternoon.

"Guddling for trout in the burn," said Ambrose promptly. "I'm

going with Ambrose," announced Jerome. "I'm sailing my yacht at the jetty," intimated Rupert.

"Very well," agreed Bridget. "I'm having a nice quiet afternoon in the garden with the darning, and little Tris will come with me and play with his bricks. Now, no falling into the water, you boys, and getting your feet wet, and all in sharp for tea at five. What about you, Bell?"

"I think I'll take a book up the hill," Bluebell lied serenely.

That was one thing in the new life of the young Oliphants. Poor Mama had always been such a fusspot who must always be knowing exactly where each child was and what he or she was doing; Mama could somehow never understand that a child requires its own secret playgrounds. Now that Papa had his new friends, however, the holiday hours at least were wonderful and free and Bridget was easy going, so long as you kept out of trouble and came punctually for meals.

Yet Bluebell had lied this afternoon wilfully. To stretch out on the hillside with a book was indeed her favourite way of escape—and the excuse she used when she went over to see Betty Bell at Maambeg—but all that morning, impelled by a craving for some sort of assurance she could hardly have defined, she had planned an escape of which the boldness frightened her.

The book of the hour under her arm, she let herself be seen following the usual path through the grounds behind the house, but as soon as she had dropped over the sustaining boundary wall, she turned right and started to run along the track by which young Julius Oliphant had so often come to his wooing of Flora Gillanders. A rough service road winding downhill among the Ardhallow villas brought her to the pier as the afternoon steamer came paddling down the loch.

People waiting for the boat glanced at her curiously. Young Miss Oliphant of Inverquey was not expected to be seen alone in public places, a book under her arm, and when Captain MacIver of the L. and W.S.'s steamer *Saturn* saw the Director's daughter cross the gangway he was at once vastly interested and concerned, having read stories of young ladies running away from home; not that a young lady could travel far with only a bit book for luggage. He stepped from the bridge on to the paddle-box to greet her.

"You'll be travelling, miss?" he inquired in the delicate Highland way.

"O, I'm just going to have tea with a friend in Mallig," replied Bluebell calmly, repeating a much-rehearsed speech. "I'll be going back with you at half-past four."

"Isn't that splendid!" cried Captain MacIver, much relieved. "Now, miss, chust you step up on the bridge with me, and you'll

not be bothered with the crowds of folk travelling this day. We'll have you round at Mallig in twenty minutes."

The seaside town on the other side of the peninsula from Inverquey, hardly seven miles away as the crow flies, seemed to Bluebell like a metropolis after the green solitude of the policies on the shores of the loch. She had driven through it once in the carriage, and now she found herself fretful and even a little afraid as she made her way through the jostling and skirling, some of it decidedly drunken, of industrial workers and their families on holiday in early July. She knew, however, that the place she sought was near the pier, and indeed it was not easily missed. Cheek-by-jowl with an old, square whitewashed church in the true Presbyterian tradition stood a high, oblong building with steep roofs and the distinctive look of a disused granary, down to the beam with a hook on it above the main door. In large red letters on its harled wall was painted the legend: THE MILLER'S BARN—Luncheons, Teas, Light Refreshments.

Bluebell lingered before the door until she could summon up courage to enter this strange, crowded place. For the girl-child out of the sheltered world of the rich it was a plunge into the fearful unknown. The mere conception of communal feeding was outwith her experience and even of her thought on the nature of the world beyond the nursery. She had never realised that so many people, in groups round small tables, could eat together and make so much noise about it, laughing and talking as if they were in their own homes. So she stood for a while within the door, staring and being stared at, conscious of the book she irrelevantly carried and beaten to know what her next move should be.

At length a waitress came up the central passage among the tables, frowning at the weight of the tray she carried.

"Can ye no' get a seat?" she asked impatiently.

"No. I really came to see Mrs. Bell," replied Bluebell politely.

"Right through to the back," said the girl, jerking her head over her shoulder.

Betty Bell looked up with startled eyes at the child's appearance at the door of the still-room in which she was working.

"Bluebell Oliphant! My dear girl, what on earth are you doing here, all alone?"

"I wanted to see you. I was . . . lonely."

The simplicity of the confession was portentous. She who had been Betty Stirling, a lonely girl herself, was immediately aware of the degree of misery within the soul of this child, and she could guess what was its immediate, sordid cause. It did not take long for gossip about the doings of Juley Oliphant and his friends to pass from the lower deck of the *Iolanthe* all along the waterfronts of the yachting world.

She divined exactly and assessed precisely the nature of the terror put upon a sensitive and intelligent little girl, a helpless prisoner of riches and privilege, but also of the crudities that were nevertheless the conditions of Juley Oliphant's way of living.

"Have I come when you are very busy?" Bluebell asked apologetically.

"We're always busy here, my dear," laughed Betty, recovering herself. "People on holiday will eat and eat, as if they had nothing else to do. But look," she said, pointing to a great array of cutlery and crockery and napery on the tables and shelves about them—"would you care to help me? This is what is called taking stock, just counting the spoons before the guests depart. I'm trying to discover how much has been stolen this week."

"Stolen!"

"Stolen—stolen off the tables, slipped into pockets and handbags, even big metal teapots," Betty explained with a laugh. "Once I caught a woman trying to get away with a huge pot-plant, about three feet high, under her macintosh. Steal! It's a good thing the building is fixed into the ground."

"How dreadful!" cried Bluebell, really horrified.

"Ah! But you don't know what it is to be poor, child!" Betty smiled gently. "We make allowances for it. It's all in the day's work. Now, there's the stock-list on the table with the names and quantities of everything we *should* possess. Now take the tray of dessert-spoons, count them in dozens and then jot down in pencil how many you've got—there, beside the figure in ink. Then we'll know how many have made their way to Garvel and Glasgow, and how many new ones I've got to buy."

The game devised to distract her soon had the child wholly absorbed. She was, in reverse, like a slum child who is given the wonderful freedom of a rich nursery. She had not felt under her hands before the texture of the ordinary life or envisaged it in terms of such large numbers of people and things. Here was a richness astonishing to a girl out of a guarded nursery—spoons, knives, forks, salt-cellars, pepper-pots, teapots, napkins, jam dishes, cream jugs, sugar basins: all the bright tools of popular catering to be counted in scores and even hundreds.

"Tired of it, Bluebell?" her hostess asked after they had worked without speaking for a time.

"No. I love it!" replied Bell enthusiastically. "It's so interesting."

"Yes, it is interesting," agreed Betty gravely. "It's all the more interesting when you have made it yourself, started quietly with your own money, and worked and worked, and seen it grow under your

hand. You must work, Bell, to be happy. Perhaps some day," she added deliberately, "you'll start something like this for yourself."

"Me! I'd never be allowed."

"Allowed? Not yet, but the time will come when nobody but yourself will be able to say what's allowed and what not. When you're eighteen, twenty-one—sooner or later—a girl becomes a woman and her own mistress. Life's a long business, Bell. Be patient about it just yet."

"Yes. . . . I'll try."

They understood each other. Betty dropped a clutch of knives into their appropriate tray with a clatter.

"Now we must be watching the time. The half-past four boat, I suppose? I'll walk down with you; I need some fresh air. I'll get you a cup of tea and a cake before you go. Or an ice? Just a moment."

When Betty returned with a tray of tea and cakes Bluebell was crying: not bitterly but dismally, sitting at the end of the table like a helpless doll, her face all red and wet

"I don't want to go home," she sobbed.

"No. I understand. But you know that you have to go home."

Betty laid the tray on the table and, as she bustled about, talked as reasonably as she could contrive, but in disjointed phrases that surprised herself with their intensity.

"It hurts just now. . . . Don't I know how it hurts! . . . My dear, I can't say anything that won't disappoint you. . . . Except what I said before: that life's a long business when you are young, and yet so short really. . . . I wonder . . . No, that's not my business. . . . Come, Bluebell, or we'll miss the boat."

They had only a few minutes on the pier while the *Saturn* crashed through the shallows on her short run down from the terminus at Rosemore. Now Betty felt utterly miserable and acutely aware of the oddity of the mere physical situation: the poor, little, rich girl, silent and unhappy, holding tight to the hand of a seaside café proprietrix, having nothing else to hold on to. They were almost comic figures together in their bleak helplessness. She racked her mind for something sensible to say.

"You can always come to see me, Bluebell, and I'll always be glad. Be patient."

But it was hopeless. You could not comfort Bluebell nor delude her with such assurances. As Betty watched the small figure cross the gangway she had the guilty feeling of having delivered an innocent back into bondage.

3

Eustace, Lord Alderford, was growing old : no doubt about that. As Julius explained it to his prospective second wife, Miss Kate Hercus, the old boy hadn't been the same since his only son was killed in South Africa : not that he, Julius—no evil of the dead and all that—had ever had much time for the Honourable Mark. The old boy was also turning eccentric in directions the simple mind of Julius found distinctly queer, not to say uncomfortable.

The manner of his appearance at Inverquey that summer was a bit thick, to say the least of it. Julius had told him of the marriage, of course, to take place very quietly in mid-August, and Kate had had a dashed nice letter from the old chap and a simply ripping antique silver teaset for a gift ; but never a word on either side that he might turn up for the wedding. Then one day a telegram from Edinburgh, if you please, suggested a brief visit, and next afternoon arrived Eustace, as large as life.

The amazing thing was that he turned up absolutely alone : no valet or anything like that ; and both Julius and Kate had thought this surprising, if not disappointing, in a nobleman. The queerest thing of all was that the old boy, who had once been a big figure on the Firth with his steam and racing yachts, had travelled like an ordinary passenger with Captain MacIver in the *Saturn* and, if you please, had walked—actually walked—all the way from the pier to the house with an old Gladstone bag in his hand !

" You can put me up, Julius ? " he had asked anxiously. " Without inconvenience ? Even with all this excitement ? I must meet your lady. Indeed, if I might be present at the ceremony. . . . A member of the old family, you know ; though where we go now I can hardly imagine. Yes, one can hardly imagine."

That was the way he went on. He mooned about the house and the grounds, suddenly saying, " Yes, indeed ! " or, " So ! " or, " Let us think, now." The old beggar could be as sharp as a needle and as hard as the devil at a Board Meeting, but even Julius could discern that in the mild, alien air of Inverquey he was a done man, ageing and softening.

Strangest of all was his new trick of measuring everything. It really alarmed Julius ; but the old boy kept producing a joiner's two-foot rule from an inside pocket and laying it along or across everything that caught his eye in a moment of abstraction—a book, an occasional table, a mantelpiece, a toy wooden engine one of the children had left adrift on the lawn.

"Three feet, six," he would mutter. "So much? I would never have guessed."

When they sat together over the port after dinner that night Eustace earnestly measured his napkin against the edge of the table.

"Exactly two feet square," he announced. Then he looked up at his host's face with a wry smile. "Old fool, eh, Julius?"

"I don't mind," laughed Julius generously.

"It comes of being alone," said Lord Alderford in the earnest manner of one sincerely anxious to break down a complex problem. "I find myself very much alone now. Emmy is somewhere in Central Europe. As you will understand, she had to escape, poor girl! My younger brother Lionel inherits, of course, and Lionel and I have never somehow—well, there it is! I may even tell you in confidence, Julius, that his wife, the future Lady Alderford, is one of the most pernicious females I have ever had the misfortune to meet. Perhaps at the root of my trouble with Lionel. Who knows? And so, Julius, in a word, if you could put up with me here for a week or so, until the ceremony is over . . ."

"But of course, Eustace! Why ask? Delighted!"

Kate was more than delighted. To have a peer in the family was much; to have the certain prospect of meeting the peer and calling him by his first name was more; but to have the peer turning up of his own accord for the wedding was a very wonderful thing in the life of a spinster in the industrial middle orders of society. The Hercus's, an honest, downright but unsubtle folk, suffered only one disappointment. Over at Inverquey one day, discussing the arrangements, Bill had a drink too much at lunch and at least once, on the lawn afterwards, smacked Lord Alderford on the back and called him "old boy."

"I tell you what," he eagerly addressed the company, "we'll have a proper beano before the wedding. If I've got to give my kid sister away, I'm going to give her away in style. A real beano, I mean: a hell of a slap-up dinner, a theatre if we're not all too tight, and a school of *vingt-et* or something afterwards. You're on, old boy, aren't you?"

Then the slap on Lord Alderford's back. Kate saw that even Julius scowled, but more anxiously she noticed how Lord Alderford winced and how a little frown of irritation passed above his eyes.

"I think not . . . old boy . . . if you will excuse me. This aged skeleton at the feast would spoil the fun. I shall be delighted to keep the fires burning against your return."

The wintry smile of the old man, succeeding the frown, was a rebuke. Kate was woman enough to perceive that the strength of your true gentleman, that cherished deity of the order of society to which she belonged, lay in reticence. As they were crossing the Firth

again in the evening boat she learned that the silent dart from the aristocratic blow-pipe had pierced even Bill's ebullient defences. Lord Alderford was a wonderful old chap, said Bill, his heavy cheeks puffing under his deerstalker, but he wasn't sure if the old beggar wasn't a bit too damned stand-offish for his, Bill Hercus's, taste.

Anyhow, Lord Alderford was present at the marriage ceremony. This took place, according to a common Scots custom, in the drawing-room of the Hercus house, a villa-fortress much in the style of Agincourt, and it was reckoned very nice and seemly by all concerned that, considering the bridegroom's misfortune, it should be a quiet affair, only twenty witnesses in the closest relationship to both parties all told, and that the bride, with a nice feeling of respect for her predecessor, should have decided to be married in a quiet going-away costume.

There was some concern among the simpler relatives when Lord Alderford, naturally the cynosure of all eyes before the bride appeared through the double doors, was seen to produce a two-foot rule from an inner pocket, and, thoughtfully measure the table from behind which the Minister was to enunciate the vows. It was agreed, however, that when the party moved to the dining-room downstairs, where the white tables of professional caterers shone against an angry red wallpaper and what Bill Hercus proudly called lashings of bubbly were available, Lord Alderford made a simply lovely speech in honour of the bride: sending all concerned away with the nice feeling that they had sped a trembling virgin to the marriage bed and not a big-boned, thirty-five-year-old-woman who, according to season, played a relentless game of lawn tennis and rode vehemently to hounds.

Eustace returned to Inverquey alone. He had meekly asked if he might remain for a week or so; there was no place like West Scotland in high summer, and he was getting to be a tired, old man; and Julius and Kate had said certainly, the house was his for so long as he cared, and they would be glad to think the children would have somebody really responsible about them. Mr. and Mrs. Julius Oliphant were sorry, indeed, that they could not offer him the use of *Iolanthe* but, as he would understand, the long-planned honeymoon was to be a cruise among the Western Isles, and Julius wasn't sure that they wouldn't have a shot at Norway; and Eustace had smiled and assured them that his yachting days, he feared, were over, and that he doubted if he would ever again have the heart to put *Styria* into commission. Just leave an old man, my dears, to potter about; the old man would not get in anybody's way.

The indoor servants at Inverquey, all women, thought the world of old Lord Alderford. "There's a real gentleman for you!" the parlourmaid summed it up, with a sinister accent on the adjective. No fuss: no bother. Old Lord Alderford, added the second house-

maid, didn't even want morning tea in his room. He was usually up as early as the kitchenmaid, and you'd see his tracks across the dew-heavy lawn, and see him earnestly measuring the girth of a tree with his two-foot rule or staring with a puzzled expression at one of the classical statues erected along the terrace by Iron Jock Gillanders. Then all he'd want for breakfast would be an apple, a corner of oatcake and a cup of China tea ; and he was always telling the girls that he hoped he was not too much trouble, and addressing them as " my dear," and asking after their mothers.

" The funny thing is," said Cook one evening, " he doesn't seem ever to look near the children. Mebbe he's just too old and done, poor soul."

" He's past playing with young folk, if that's what you mean, Mrs. Macvicar," remarked Bridget, looking up from her sewing, " but he's always watching them, the same old gentleman."

He would stand under the screen of buddleia for many minutes on end, watching the three older boys at play in the mouth of the burn, perhaps thinking of the one of his own he had lost, poor old body. Sometimes he would pause by Bridget's chair where she was sitting out in the garden with little Tristram playing his quiet games about her feet : little Tristram forever running to her lap with his small discoveries and frequent sorrows.

" A frailer child than his brothers, Bridget," the old man had remarked thoughtfully.

" Yes, sir," Bridget had replied, remembering her place and responsibility, " but not so gentle as wee Rupert."

" Yes, a frail child. To be sure, his mother was a sick woman when . . . And now he has no mother. Quite a problem, Bridget, I'm sure you agree."

" Yes, sir."

O, yes ! Old Lord Alderford was as moony and eccentric as you pleased, but he didn't miss much. In her wisdom, in her secret but passionate responsibility for five orphan children, Bridget felt that this queer old man had their problem sized up as subtly and accurately as anybody.

One morning he came upon them among the apple trees behind the house : Bridget in her immemorial chair, little Tristram shunting imaginary trains with a wooden engine, Bluebell stretched out on a rug, her hair falling over the pages of *Through the Looking-Glass*. And suddenly, as if at the sight of Lord Alderford approaching, Bluebell scrambled to her feet and darted away, a timid animal seeking protective colouring, into a thicket of rhododendron. Bridget was (as she phrased it later to Bluebell herself) black affronted by the rudeness of this flight from a poor old gentleman that wouldn't hurt

a fly, but she was also on the edge of defence for the most difficult of her charges.

" Good morning, Bridget ! Hullo, Tristram ! That's a fine engine of yours. I wish we had one like it on the London and West Scottish."

The child ran to Bridget's lap but anon turned his head to goggle as the ancient stranger produced a two-foot rule from his pocket and amiably measured the length, height and gauge of the toy vehicle, muttering figures as he did so.

" An eccentric design according to British standards," pronounced Lord Alderford, beaming at Bridget. " But tell me, where has the little girl gone ? I mean . . . ah, yes ! . . . Bluebell. And why should I forget that name ? Age, Bridget, age ! . . . But the child escapes me. She runs away. Tell me, Bridget ; do I somehow frighten her ? "

" No, sir. It's not that way at all, if you please. Goodness knows," Bridget confided, " there's whiles I could spank her for bad manners. But the poor wee lass is—well, it's not for me to say, sir."

" You mean lonely ? Perhaps afraid ? "

" She needs a mother," declared Bridget.

" I'm sure you do your best."

" It's not the same, sir ! " protested Bridget, although Lord Alderford's compliment had flattered her. " It's nothing like the same. They can say what they like, but a wee girl needs a mother, and nobody else will do but her own mother. Woman, even when they're wee girls . . . But mebbe I'm telling too much, my lord. I beg your pardon."

Lord Alderford took with his yellow rule a casual measurement of the breath of young Tristram's backside, upended over his toy engine and tight within velveteen trousers.

" A mere fifteen inches," he reported carefully and returned to the subject in hand. " Perhaps the trouble, Bridget, is that you do not talk enough. Or it may be that you are not heard. Still, a problem exists. And there it is."

With that, and a smile, Lord Alderford moved away among the apple trees towards the cup of soup, the salad and the small portion of cheese on a water biscuit that made up his lunch. He did not know, what Bridget knew, that the parlourmaid drank two glasses to his one of the burgundy he frugally accepted as a tonic. A very decent Corton, but Julius might have been more shrewdly advised in his buying.

4

With the best part of sixteen hundred paying passengers on board and the fourteen-piece German band playing the *Washington Post* march (if hardly with the precision imparted to its performance by John Philip Sousa himself at the Glasgow Exhibition of the same year) the turbine steamer *Princess Alexandra* slipped out of Glenburn Bay, as lithe in her lines as an antelope for those with eyes for a ship and, even at speed, almost silent save for the faint drum of her still mysterious new engines and the rustle of the wash she set up on the calm sea of a brassy, thunder-laden afternoon.

It was not known to the people who filled the vessel with a most gratifying pay-load that a Peer of the Realm was among them. If they had been aware of the fact, those artisans, shopkeepers, clerks, small professional men and their wives and children would have been both excited and gratified; but they would assuredly have taken his presence as a no more than proper compliment to the steamer in which, proudly, most of them were travelling for the first time.

The Turbine had succeeded. To have sailed in the Turbine had become a distinction among a longshore people. It had become almost a race to find a free day and take a passage in the *Princess Alexandra*, and thereafter enjoy a heavy advantage in anecdote and discussion. She just slips through the water. . . . You hardly know you're moving. . . . Perhaps a wee bit vibration towards the stern. . . . You should just see the lounge tearoom. . . . So the conventional boasts were bandied along the shores of the Firth, foolishly enough, but thus and thus did a people that lived largely by the building of ships, and took most of its holiday pleasure in sailing on the estuarine waters, greet the sort of miracle they were best equipped to appreciate.

The *Princess Alexandra* ripped up the Firth that day with, in the eyes of the northern folk, almost as much circumstance and certainly more significance than the Guards, Horse and Foot, being groomed and drilled for the Coronation. Her performance was ever so much more immediate and therefore more important than a Mounted Infantryman, dying with bubbling lungs on the slopes of the Magaliesberg.

If not recognised by this absorbed people, Eustace, Lord Alderford, could not but be noticed as he walked the length of the ship's deck or dived down companion-ways to inspect the fascinating engine-room and the cabin accommodation. Those orderly day-trippers stared at the exotic appearance presented by a tall, elderly person who, in a black Inverness cape and a high-crowned hat with a flapping

brim, would stand in the bows of the ship looking down her length, his head cocked sideways and speaking to himself, or be seen beside the German band with a smile of simple pleasure on his face and a long forefinger beating time to the *Poet and Peasant* overture or whatever it might be. These Scots folk concluded that such a queer old geezer must be an Englishman, and some of them, studying the distinguished features, also decided that he must be a Somebody.

His presence in the ship was of profound concern to the man in command on the bridge. Calum Bell had been disturbed to see the unexpected figure cross the gangway at Glenburn, as conspicuous among the holiday crowd as a whippet in a pack of mongrel terriers. So the old fox was on the prowl, seeing for himself what Juley Oliphant had neither the brains nor knowledge to report on accurately; the L. and W. S. were preparing for war, were they? Well, they would have a right battle for it this time. But Captain Bell was troubled; and as his ship sped past the Knock Light, raising the Highland peaks on the northern selvedges of the Firth with phantasmagoric speed, as in the theatre, he blew down a voice-pipe and passed an urgent message below.

Watch in hand, Lord Alderford was leaning over the engine-room rails when a woman's voice broke into his abstractions and calculations.

"You are Lord Alderford, I think?" it said courteously.

The old man had quite a job trying to put his watch away and raise his shabby hat simultaneously. He found himself looking into the tolerantly amused, pale face of a smallish, darkish woman very nicely turned out (as his experienced eye appreciated at once) in a costume of good grey Cheviot.

"Alderford? Yes, indeed! I am the man. If you will excuse my awkwardness, madam. . . . At a slight disadvantage."

"I am Mrs. Bell—Captain Bell's wife. He has just told me from the bridge that you came on board at Glenburn. I wondered if you would care to have a cup of tea with me."

"A cup of tea? My dear madam, how very civil of you! You said *tea* . . ."

The little woman smiled faintly and led his lordship aft, explaining by way of conversation her intrusion.

"We'll have it in my husband's cabin. The big lounge will be packed just now. We do extremely well with afternoon teas. By the way, the catering is my business. This is my one day in the *Princess*, every Friday. I've quite enough to do with a restaurant of my own in Mallig."

"It seems to be my lucky day," said Lord Alderford gallantly, side-stepping a small boy being noisily chased by another along the engine-room alleyway.

"That's the tea-lounge, packed out as usual," said Betty casually, as they passed the swing doors of a crowded public room.

"God bless my soul!"

Lord Alderford's keen eye for such things allowed him to see at a glance that, as in the *Heather Bell* nearly fifteen years before, a new idea had been applied. Instead of a stuffy cabin wasting the saloon deck space along one-third of the ship's length, a musty, plush-upholstered chamber serving as a glorified cloakroom, the new *Princess* had a bright tearoom. Each small table had its vase of flowers, its gleaming appointments. Even on the wettest of western days the passengers could sit in comfort and enjoy the scene through wide, uncurtained windows of stout glass. It was a pleasant room, tasteful, profitable—three qualities that pleased Eustace, Lord Alderford.

Even the cabin into which he followed the captain's wife revealed to his experienced eye some charming departures from old ship's custom. Again the room was finely lighted by a deep window; the captain's berth was a proper bed, daintily clothed; the table-chairs were of oak, rush-bottomed, and for leisure there were two deep basket-chairs in white cane with bright blue cushions.

"Delightful!" murmured Lord Alderford. "Genius has been at play here. I mean that, madam—genius."

"Not genius, Lord Alderford," Betty demurred with a smile. "Just the application of a woman's sense of comfort and fairly long experience of catering to a given problem. The shipyard men got to loathe me. China or Indian, Lord Alderford?"

"Indian if you please, my dear. . . . I beg your pardon! O, I do beg your pardon! Age, Mrs. Bell, age . . . I might even plead the impact of this ship's youthfulness—so many new ideas sensibly and elegantly applied. Your husband has a very fine ship, Mrs. Bell. I congratulate you both, sincerely."

"Thank you, Lord Alderford," returned Betty demurely but with a defiant rider: "Yes, we're proud of the *Princess*."

"And this time," said Eustace gently, "the majority shareholder is not selling out to the railway company?"

Betty turned sharply from the stove, the bright metal teapot in her hand. The old fox! Was this a statement, or a question? But the old man's face wore a quizzical, friendly smile. She could not but smile, however bleakly, in return.

"No, Lord Alderford. This time the majority shareholder is not selling out."

"Quite right. You will appreciate, Mrs. Bell, that we have to watch our competitors. Naturally. The identity of the majority shareholder was not hard to discover. And now, madam, I know that we have a foeman worthy of our steel." The white head bobbed

over his cup. "This is a delicious tea. Those scones! That we can't produce in England."

"I take a good deal of trouble to get as near as possible to home-baking. People appreciate that little bit of special, nearly personal attention; therefore it pays, which is my business. . . . As for the *Princess*, Lord Alderford, does it interest the L. and W. S. to know that we have ordered the sister ship for next season? She will be better, much better, than this."

Eustace considered with bland interest this declared adversary. It was his first encounter with the new woman of affairs, and he was fascinated. Remarkable that so much sense should be behind that pale though pleasant face, so much confidence at the back of the gentle eyes, so much drive within the slight body! But the little woman was anxious and defiant.

"Then we should be starting far behind you," he replied to her statement. "But I think you misunderstand me a little, Mrs. Bell. I am not here either to spy or to attempt a deal, believe me! May not an elderly amateur look round?"

"I can never forget what happened to the *Heather Bell*."

"And you know that it cannot happen to the *Princess Alexandra*," said Lord Alderford kindly, "the majority shareholder being a lady of great courage, originality and loyalty."

Betty blushed and laughed.

"You are a remarkable man, Lord Alderford."

"Say, rather, an old man, my dear lady. To clinch the matter, let me tell you frankly that I do not see a ship of this size and speed suiting our railway trade. You are making a new sort of trade, and I wish you and your husband very well in it. Now, shall we forget business entirely while I, if I may, help myself to still another scone? I should be so much more interested, so very much more interested, to hear how you came to form all these excellent ideas, to create a catering business, to acquire—if I may, take the liberty—such a substantial interest in a ship so fine as this. I am curious, frankly!"

"It started with the *Heather Bell*, Lord Alderford," said Betty with a grim little smile.

"Ah, that fatal vessel! Rigged with curses dark, indeed. But if it is not a gross impertinence . . . You are a portent, you know, Mrs. Bell."

"Well, when my husband had to go back to sea, and we wanted to get married, I simply decided that I would have to start making some money of my own. Frankly, when I thought of Julius Oliphant with all that inherited money but without the brains to make a five-pound note on his own account—really, Lord Alderford!"

" Proceed, my dear lady. I follow your argument with ease."

Smiling, the old man produced his folding-rule and absently measured things while Betty sketched the making of a woman of affairs, yet she knew somehow that he was listening eagerly, appreciatively. It was pleasant to talk to a man of intelligence and good manners ; it was a satisfaction to analyse and justify, if only to herself, all the motives and moves which had led to this strange meeting as an equal in power with one who had been, if not an enemy, a feared adversary.

The discourse was suddenly interrupted. The cabin door flew open and a little girl burst in, crying excitedly, " Mrs. Bell ! "

It was Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, now frozen with horror in the doorway to see who confronted her.

" What is it, child ? " asked Betty more than a little impatiently.

" O, I'm sorry ! " apologised Bluebell tremulously.

" It is not so serious as all that, my dear," said Lord Alderford quickly. " I am sure Mrs. Bell was getting tired of my company."

" I wanted to know if I might go up on the bridge with Captain Bell," explained the child, but without much hope. " It's so exciting when we go through the Narrows."

" Certainly. Off you go ! "

The small figure disappeared with alacrity, slamming the door behind her. Betty sat looking at it, biting her lower lip.

" An interesting encounter," observed Lord Alderford mildly, " but surely no cause of vexation, my dear lady."

" It might have been her father, and what then ? " Betty almost snapped back. She started to explain rapidly. " That child is lonely and unhappy : more terribly so than anybody else knows. By a queer accident we made friends, and now she likes to come and see me when she can slip away. To-day I had to bring her with me. I don't know what to do about it. You see how difficult the problem is ? "

" Difficult, yes. But impossible ? "

" Do you imagine for a moment, Lord Alderford, that Julius Oliphant would approve of me as his daughter's friend, with all those social and personal differences between us ? And the poor child still comes to me of all people, playing truant ! I can't send her away, can I ? She's a very dear child—intelligent, trustful. She's got no mother, and now she's got even worse than no mother : nobody except that nurse woman. It can't go on, Lord Alderford. It's a ludicrous situation : a silly situation, but I honestly go in mortal terror of an explosion that will make the girl's life more of a misery than ever."

" You care for her deeply, madam," said Lord Alderford with concern.

"I . . . well, I do, and goodness knows why! But there it is. Don't you care for an unhappy child?"

Eustace looked earnestly into Betty's anxious face, now faintly flushed with vehemence.

"I do," he said. "I once had a son: a nervous, subtle boy. At Inverquey I have tried, quite in vain, to engage this elusive little girl. That excellent woman, Bridget, has hinted at much of what you tell me now. And yet how can I, any more than you, my dear lady, intervene: even think of a solution of the problem?"

Betty jumped from her chair and started mechanically to gather the dishes on the table.

"I think that you *can* intervene, Lord Alderford, if I may suggest it," she said.

"You interest me greatly."

"You are the head of the house, surely. Julius Oliphant has neither brains nor will of his own. You have only got to say the word."

"You are relentless, Mrs. Bell. But this word of yours?"

"Obviously, that Bluebell should be sent to a good boarding school for girls?"

"Ah!"

Lord Alderford rose from his place and awkwardly collected his regrettable hat from a table by the door. He smiled in his mild way and took Betty's hand.

"Your hospitality has been charming, Mrs. Bell, and our little talk has been a delight to me, at least. And that poor little, lost girl. . . . I wonder if your good sense hasn't solved still another problem? Shall we try? Yes, I think so. And may I report to you? *Heather Bell* and now Bluebell . . . a terrible thing the burden of the years; and so many implications! But now we must be getting near Hamilton's Quay, where I must change into a mere L. and W. S. paddler. The child will come with me, of course? You will be sure to tell her that I am far too old to want to tell tales out of school? My best wishes to Captain Bell and the ship."

5

The second Mrs. Julius Oliphant climbed the great staircase of Inverquey House with something of the consciously resolute air of a soldier going into battle for the first time. She had returned from her honeymoon only that morning, and now she was on her way to the nurseries to face the task of being a mother to the other woman's children and a good, managing wife to Julius.

Kate Hercus was not a subtle woman, perhaps even too blunt

of mind to be anything but courageous, but she did not approach her task without trepidation over and above the slight distaste which naturally arose out of her spinterish indifference to children.

She had given a good deal of thought, in fact, to the technique proper to the occasion. She had inevitably determined in the first place, being a Hercus, that she would stand no nonsense, but she had also decided on a policy of forbearance and tolerance until, as she and Julius phrased it, she had got to know the ropes. She would try to be more like a sportsmanlike aunt than a gusher overdoing it in a silly attempt to be a sweet, little, new mother to the orphans. There was the awkward question of whether to kiss or not to kiss, but though it was not what she would have chosen for herself, Kate had decided that the kids would expect it and that she would therefore go through with it.

Bridget had the four boys in the day nursery, all attention in their nightgowns and dressing-gowns while she read them a story out of a blue tome called *Young England.* There was no difficulty for Kate here. Her four stepsons were much more concerned by the interruption of the story than by any other aspect of her appearance among them. They accepted each a smacking salute on the cheek and an omnibus "Good night, boys!" and turned to Bridget to resume the more important part of the proceedings.

Kate found Bluebell at her dressing table, earnestly brushing her long, fair hair. The reflection in the mirror was of a small face, unhappy and strained. It kept on staring at itself, fixed in an unfriendly determination.

"You all right, Bluebell?" the stepmother contrived to seem casual.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"I said, yes."

The child was rude, and it was according to a plan. Kate Hercus had schooled herself to make allowances, to hold her horses, as she had phrased it to Julius when he had warned her that she would find Bluebell a queer kid. She had anticipated hostility, but she was herself a woman of spirit, and this spoiled brat needed putting in her place at once. But just one more effort at tolerance would be made.

"Is that a way to speak to Mother?" she asked.

The answer was a shout:

"You're *not* my mother!"

The shout died away into a wall of misery.

"You'll *never* be my mother!"

The fair head drooped to the surface of the table and shook to

such a bitter, loud sobbing as Kate had never heard in all her life among the tough, pugnacious Hercus's.

"Stop that!" she commanded.

It had no effect on the child, and Kate's instinct was to give those heaving shoulders a good shake. At the same time, a lurking sense of the complexity of the situation being created between herself and the girl irked her.

"Very well," she said quietly, turning to the door. "We'll see what your Papa has to say."

Julius looked up from the evening paper when she rejoined him in the smoke-room.

"Coffee on the tray there, dear," he greeted her. "Try a spot of whisky in it—yes, right into the coffee. *Café avec*, we call it in the Club: jolly good! One of Bill's inventions. Or would you prefer a spot of Benny or a wee Starboard Light? In the cupboard there. How are the kids?"

"Oh, all right," said Kate equably. "I'm not so sure about Bluebell though. Still a bit touchy and difficult, if you ask me: not that it's anything to be surprised about."

"Always was a queer kid," Julius agreed.

Kate raised her cup and sipped the *café avec*.

"Jolly good! Trust old Bill," she commented expertly, adding: "All the same, Juley, I'd think about boarding school for Bluebell."

"Yes, rather! That was an idea of old Eustace's, wasn't it? What was the place he suggested . . . Roe-something or other, down Brighton way? And if we could get the two older boys packed away somewhere—well, I mean to say, it would make things a good deal easier all round, wouldn't it? I'll get on to that first thing in the morning. Now, come and have a hundred up—and no handicap this time, my girl. You're just a bit too damned good at that in-off in the middle pocket."

6

"Next business," rapped Lord Alderford. "Turbine steamer developments."

"Well, sir——" began Julius, clearing his throat and tipping back his chair on its hind legs. He had the air of one about to make a portentous pronouncement.

"If you will forgive me, Mr. Oliphant," the chairman intervened. "There is so much to get through to-day. It so happens, gentlemen, I was able to go over this new ship, the *Princess Alexandra*, while I was our friend's guest in Scotland. Briefly, this is a very fine ship:

fast, commodious and finely appointed. Our own catering department might study the latter aspect with advantage. But as to trading on the Firth; as to any suggestion that we might have to go in for competitive building, this new ship will not, in my opinion, affect us at all. She is beautifully fitted for long-distance cruising, but her length and speed render her quite unsuitable for the short hauls from pier to pier that it is our business to provide. The *Princess Alexandra* may create a new trade of her own; she will not affect ours. I suggest we leave it there, with a simple instruction to the Marine Superintendent on the spot to keep us informed."

"Agreed, agreed!" murmured the directors of the L. and W. S.

"Next business," said Lord Alderford.

To this Julius paid very little attention, for he felt strongly that Eustace was getting a bit too sharp and dictatorial altogether. Dash it! hadn't he, Julius, gone into this business thoroughly? And wasn't Eustace's intervention merely to the effect he had maintained from the word Go—that the L. and W. S. had nothing to fear from this blasted Turbine?

7

The departure of the Oliphant children for boarding school, as the phrase went in those days, was more, much more, than a topic for envious or admiring gossip in a small Scottish seaport. It was a new thing altogether in the evolution of industrial society. It was a wheeling movement in the progress of the wealthy by inheritance from the pioneer traders of Victoria's period, whereby, at once, a native tradition of simplicity was abandoned and a position of privilege surrendered by aristocracy.

Dying (in 1906, after a stroke) old Lord Alderford discoursed disjointedly on the topic to the favourite of his last years, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant. He often asked of her headmistress that the grave, maturing girl—"perhaps the most intelligent of my few remaining friends, my dear lady"—be allowed across country to spend a Sunday with him. So the blue Darracq with the violent red upholstery would be sent to bring an enchanted child along the dusty lanes of Sussex and Hampshire to the settled mellowness of Alderford Old Manor. Uncle Eustace was the sweetest of all, the best after Betty Bell and Bridget. He reminded her vaguely of Grandpa Gillanders in his old age, but he was different. O, quite different!

They were together one July day in the sunniest spot of the rough lawn that sloped down to the lake. The third Lord Alderford lay under a rug on a sort of glorified camp bed his manservants had carried

out of the house and down the steps of the terrace to his whimsical and now customary admonition: "Gentlemen, my bearers! Ye carry Cæsar and his fortunes. Steady!" (Gettin' a bit light in the 'ead, the old gent! Talks like 'e was Henry Irving or somebody. Decent old party, just the same.) Bluebell, in the white silk blouse, striped tie, linen collar and almost ankle-length skirt of the contemporary maiden in uniform, occupied a basket chair beside the pallet. Tea was on a gate-legged table between chair and pallet, its transport to that given position being the sole duty and guarded privilege of the second footman. A black spaniel, old and done like its master, lay at Bluebell's feet, its head cradled between its outstretched paws.

The tiny group on that wide stretch of English parkland had the look of an isolated intimacy, and as between the old man and the schoolgirl there had indeed grown up within these five years a rare sort of understanding: to him restful, to her reassuring. She had filled his last years with interest and charm; he had come to be for her a point of security and wisdom in a life she still found disturbing, especially in its prospects.

"I'm going to miss Alderford," she suddenly said, "and I'm going to miss school."

"Ah, yes! Your last term," said the old man, appearing to start from a doze. He chuckled: "You did not feel that way five years ago, my dear child."

"No," she laughed back. "That was the wonderful thing you did for me—you and Betty Bell. And I thought that being sent away to boarding school was my stepmother's way of getting rid of me. So it was in a way, I suppose, but they might have explained. I'm sorry now that I hated her, and that I was so unfriendly, but I was really just an unhappy kid in a blue funk, and nobody would explain things to me."

"Yes. She was not a subtle woman, poor soul! And now she seems a figure of tragedy, and we remember the Beatitudes."

They spoke of Kate Hercus as belonging to the past. So much could happen within the space of five years. It was like the case of Emmy, who was still alive but dead within the Oliphant understanding of things. Uncle Eustace could speak kindly of her going out of his life, saying that her English life almost naturally ended when the boy died in South Africa. He could read Bluebell interesting little bits out of her occasional letters from Hungary. But she was gone never to return, like Kate Hercus who, in her thirty-eighth year and after some twenty months of married life, died after giving birth to a daughter, christened Rose Anne: her body of a sportswoman failing to take the strain.

"And still," said Lord Alderford, suddenly resuming his train of thought, "I sometimes wonder if we did wisely in having you sent

away to school, out of your environment, into the very heart of an alien tradition, in fact."

"Uncle Eustace, I don't quite understand. I've been wonderfully happy at school: much happier than I ever expected to be. It has been my life—it and Alderford, of course."

"The very point I am trying to make! . . . If you would be good enough to hand me one of those thin brown sandwiches, my dear. . . . For now you go back to Agincourt and Inverquey. You return well equipped, to be sure, with your good sense sharpened and a poise —well, shall we say?—you might not have acquired if you had been kept at home all these years. But you return to a society that is not, to be frank, greatly interested in the things of the spirit."

As he talked, really phrasing his own conclusions from a long experience now drawing to an end, Bluebell's heart sank. Again she thought of the great villa in Garvel as the fortress-prison and of a way of life which, although almost grossly comfortable and elaborately protected, had next to no place in it for pictures or books or music.

"Ah, it's a grim set of problems we get out of the interplay of wealth and brains, of industrial riches and education!" the tired voice resumed. "Brains, intelligence, taste—these we cannot budget for; Gregor Mendel himself couldn't. The tragedy is that the industrial rich tend to fear the incidence of brains and to distrust education. Education for them is seldom more than a stage in the process of social advancement. It becomes good form, as they say, to send the grandsons of peasants to Winchester and the granddaughters of cotton-weavers to Cheltenham: merely good form. And what comes of it?"

He was speaking a little beyond the understanding of the girl, and she did not attempt to answer his rhetorical question. Her gesture of interest was to lift an empty cup from his lap and replace it on the table.

"All we seem to get, my dear Bell, is the proliferation of a new sort of landed proprietor, country gentlemen, so called: educated to the aristocratic pattern indeed, but with no feeling at all for the fine old principle of *noblesse oblige*. They do not behave as the native landowners did. They do not till the soil; they rather let it go out of cultivation deliberately so that they may have shooting, fishing, hunting and what not. They do not cherish a proud peasantry; the cottagers are rather a nuisance, except in so far as they provide gamekeepers and kitchenmaids. Their estates are gardens, and their mansion houses are villas, mere extensions of suburbia. And all this is maintained by wealth derived from remote sources, wealth merely inherited, wealth made for these idle children of the pioneers by remote working folk, handled by obedient managers and bankers at

fixed salaries, and finally passed on to people who have no glimmering at all of the processes whereby such wealth is created, no thought for the poverty of the prime producers."

Lord Alderford spoke bitterly, and Bluebell, afraid that he might over-excite himself, sought to distract him with a laugh.

"I'm afraid you're a Socialist after all, Uncle Eustace!"

"A Socialist? My dear child, where do you get your ideas? Is this what they teach young ladies nowadays?" he chuckled. "A name is nothing, Bluebell. Too often it is just a label stuck on by those who will not think for themselves. How very odd it all is! To many hundreds of railway workers I am a tyrant, a bloated capitalist, with a title bought by contributions to Party funds. But at least I have used my inherited money and deployed it to make work. Mine has perhaps not been the perfect life, child, but as I prepare to face my Maker I do like to think that it has been active, constructive. My true worry is that too many inheritances are static, unproductive, selfish. I greatly fear there must be a day of painful reckoning."

Bluebell knew that Uncle Eustace was speaking of such as her father, and she longed in the altruistic ardour of her youth to ask him how she, a protected, disciplined female, could find a way of escape from the prison she saw awaiting her beyond the gentle rise of the Downs. She was distracted, however, by an eager effort of the old man to sit erect and discipline his paralysed legs accordingly. Her arm strong round his shoulders, she helped him up, the other hand deftly re-arranging the cushion behind his back.

"That is much better," he said. "You are a great help to me, my dear. Now let us look about us."

However familiar, the Alderford scene never failed to enchant the girl from the North. Inverquey in the summer was a glory, a riot of high hills and deep salt waters, or colour ever changing in the fickle, exquisite northern sunlight; but when she looked at or from the grounds about Alderford Old Manor she could not get away from the ordered grace of the English scene, from the unemphatic loveliness of trees and downs and flat fields, and steeples in sweet, settled harmony. Now the southern landscape seemed to have taken on an elegiac quality as the sun dipped towards the West and old Lord Alderford's talk became more and more clearly that of one who seeks to make a final disposition.

"And why should I speak harshly of the lazy and self-indulgent rich?" he asked mildly. "All this is so very beautiful. In my house I have, I hope, always cherished the arts and the cultures. But even in this gracious aspect, my dear child, you see inherited wealth passing out of usefulness in a twilight of decadence."

A queer impulse of loyalty towards the old man who decried even himself gave Bluebell the power of words to express a bold idea.

"But you had a son, Uncle Eustace!" she declared stoutly. "He would have carried on your work, if only——"

"Well said, Bluebell!" the old man approved. "But you forget that my poor Mark died meeting a mere conventional obligation of rank."

He was not bitter. His mood was rather gentle, tolerant, valedictory. After a silence he resumed briskly.

"Now we must think of getting indoors again, my friend, for I promised you would be back at school in good time. One thing before we go; one thing I wish you to know and remember."

He stretched out a frail hand to take one of hers, but his gentle speech was without sentimentality.

"It is important to be frank with those we love, dear Bluebell," he said, "and you and I will not have many more meetings. Just this. If you ever need help or advice Alderford is your home so long as I live. When I am gone, that excellent woman, Mrs. Bell, will be at hand. But all the little wisdom and knowledge of life I possess compel me to warn you, my dear child, that your happiness can only be in your own hands ultimately, in your own character and your own brains. I thank God that you have plenty of both."

Bluebell felt the hot sting of tears at her eyes. It most desolately seemed that her Uncle Eustace was at once saying goodbye and warning her against certain unhappiness in store.

"That is what I would say to a daughter of my own, had I been so blessed. You understand me, Bluebell?"

"Yes, Uncle Eustace," she replied, struggling not to make it a sob.

"Good! Now, will you run up to the house and call the men down to carry this absurd carcase indoors? I have a lovely basket of fruit ready for you to take back to school."

It was an end then. Bluebell guessed as much in the moment and realised it later on. She saw Uncle Eustace once again, about a fortnight later, but the brain had lost its edge and she could only try to amuse and soothe an old man dying in confusion of the mind and disintegration of the faculties.

CHAPTER VII

THE WEST ROOM

I

IT WAS PITIFUL that the crisis had to come on the evening of the day of Papa's funeral, at almost exactly eight o'clock of that gusty Thursday, March 19, 1918.

Often enough afterwards Bluebell reflected that this sordid circumstance was a psychological inevitability, an explosion bound to take place when the single tie binding her in fidelity to the Boys was removed by death. On the other hand, she might with more decency have awaited another opportunity; or the Boys might have been more tactful on that evening of all evenings. So it happened, however; and she was left again with the shabby feeling that her own generation of Oliphants was fated to the vulgar.

The Honourable Charles Oliphant had come and gone, almost effusively anxious to excuse himself from waiting for dinner. It seemed as if Glasgow and the night train for the South held him in a paralysis of anxiety. He had partaken of a drink, then tea, and then another drink; and then he had gone. The Boys were not of the sort to question the motives of aristocracy, but an expression of their disappointment was wrung at length from Jerome, the impatient one.

"I must say Charles seemed in a devilish hurry to get away," he complained in his bogus-decisive manner, snapping the ash off his cigarette with a crack of his fingers. "Seems dashed odd to me that he has to run for the six-fifteen. That leaves him two hours to kick his heels in Glasgow."

"Well, he has missed a dam' good dinner," observed the more stolid and more stupid Ambrose, "and a nice talk, too."

Bell smiled faintly, thinking that Charles had quite probably taken a fair measure of her brothers' interest as conversationalists, knowing also that the Boys would do full justice to the excellent dinner that had in fact been prepared.

She did not join her brothers at their meal. Such, except on state occasions, had become the custom of the house ever since Papa, withdrawing from the battle after his third experiment in marriage, had gathered his sons in a protective ring about him and made a gentleman's clubhouse of the big West Room. Bluebell was in fact much happier to enjoy a feminine snack-supper with Rose Anne, and some-

times Bridget as well, in the little sewing-room at the back of the house the women had taken for their own.

It was from thence she was summoned on that March evening to face the Boys by the housemaid, Hannah, bobbing in the doorway.

"Mr. Ambrose's compliments, Miss Bell, and he would be glad if you'd step along to the West Room."

"But I'm having supper!" Bell protested petulantly. "O, all right, Hannah! Tell them I'll be along shortly."

She rose and threw her napkin on the table. Her half-sister Rose Anne raised her mild, wide, grey eyes to consider, with her almost mystical detachment, the intensity of Bell's mood. Rose Anne was rarely passionate in her own personal relationships. Bell returned her look with a wry smile.

"Damn their eyes!" she swore heartily. "But we may as well have it out. This is where the fun begins, Rosie."

She swept towards battle through the passages of Agincourt, but the way was long enough to allow her to remember that the keeping of her temper was the strongest weapon she could possess. She was cool, wary and assured as she entered the big West Room and advanced through swirling drifts of fragrant, expensive tobacco smoke to where three of her brothers were stretched in leather chairs around the monstrous fireplace.

"You wished to see me, Ambrose?" she said cheerfully. "I haven't finished supper, by the way."

None of the men rose at her entrance. None suggested that she might take a seat among them. Bluebell noticed only, and with amusement, the uneasy but sympathetic grin on the handsome face of Rupert, by far the sweetest and weakest of all the family, and the only dark one of the lot.

"O yes, Bell!" began Ambrose, clearing his throat with a cough that absurdly blew his fair moustache out beyond the end of his nose. "We've been thinking that perhaps we ought to have a talk with you about the future, about household arrangements and all that, now that—well, things have changed a bit."

"I quite agree," returned Bell quietly.

"Good!" said Ambrose, relieved. He took on the manner of a chairman. "I think you'll agree with us that the real family—you know what I mean?—can rub along very nicely; I mean you and Jerome and Rupert and Tristram . . . and myself, of course. It's what exactly to do about Rose Anne and Chris . . . I mean to say. We thought we might——"

"What did you think, Ambrose?" asked Bluebell.

Her voice was cold. She was horrified, but she was still able to realize that her oldest brother, a dolt but not a cad, had almost no

capacity to organize his thoughts and express them simply. She merely waited to hear how far he was being simply self-important, how far he was concerned to pass on orders from the West Room. It might have been all right. The crisis might never have arisen. It was just that Jerome snapped in with a speech unreasonable and arrogant—Jerome's neurotic false-energy always seeking to display its possessor as a master.

" I'll give you an instance, if you want one," he intervened. His crackling fingers snapped cigarette-ash over the club-fender. " That child Chris—clattering and shouting up and down the passage while we were trying to entertain Charles. The thing was a damned scandal. Can't she be kept in order ? "

Bluebell felt her fingers gripping the edge of one of the milled brass ash-trays. And this was her beloved brother, Jerome, whom she disliked and despised in fact. He was by far the most handsome of all the Boys : tall, with silver-grey hair now, always extremely well-dressed, with a face which, lying wildly as to the character behind it, looked strong and distinguished. Bell snapped at him.

" Chris is your sister as well as mine. Or am I regarded merely as a nursemaid ? And what has her behaviour this evening, which cannot have been so very dreadful, got to do with those arrangements for the future Ambrose talks about ? "

" Quite, Bell ! " Ambrose hastened puffily to dismiss the asperity as if it had never arisen. " We've all got to take this calmly."

Dammit, he thought to himself, old Jerome was a violent idiot sometimes, and Bluebell always was a vixen if you crossed her ! These two had been at each other's throats since they were kids. Bell on her part saw Jerome biting his nails angrily and Rupert with his flushed, unhappy gaze fixed on the rug.

" I have thought a good deal about it, Ambrose," she said, " and I may have certain arrangements of my own to make. Quite your best plan would be to engage a good housekeeper, and of course I'll be delighted to help. If you care to think of that, we can discuss the details some other time. I've still got my supper to finish."

A sort of bellow of pleading from Ambrose followed her, but she marched decisively out of the West Room, her straight back defiant. Ambrose's lower lip was sagging and quivering as he gathered the looks of his brothers.

" Well, I'll be damned ! " he said heavily.

Jerome lit another cigarette with a forceful puff and threw the match violently against the tiles.

" Tantrums ! " he pronounced. " Sheer dam' bad temper ! Give her a day or two to cool down and we'll hear no more of this nonsense."

" My God ! " cried Rupert, speaking for the first time, unhappily. " It will be awful if Bell clears out and leaves us."

" Who suggested anything so dam' silly ? " snapped Jerome, but Rupert just shook his head over Jerry's old trick of dismissing every idea he could not bear to entertain.

" I'll see her in the morning," said Ambrose gallantly. " Bit of a strain on everybody to-day. Got to make allowances, Jerry old boy. Now, what about a three-handed rubber ? I want some of my money back off you, young Rupert."

Bluebell did not return to her supper but to the security of her own bedroom. She found herself trembling uncontrollably.

So this was it after all those years of indecision ; this was how you slipped over the edge in a moment of mere irritation. Had they quite understood, those stupid men in the West Room, their brains insulated by complacency against the drama of life ? With not a little relief she reflected that she had not announced an absolute decision. But she had said enough to make the moment inescapable. And would her body and hands not stop trembling like those of a frightened fool ?

There was never complete escape. For the adult of honest mind life was inveterately complex, a maze through which neither philosophy nor the most childlike faith could show an easy path. And when one was a woman, burdened by her very virtue of responsibility, it seemed that while the mere fact of emancipation was possible, it was not possible utterly to emancipate the heart. It was so strange, almost so comically irritating, that she, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, in the thirtieth year of her life, of independent means and with a mind toughened by conflict, should be hesitating on the very threshold of freedom on account of the infant child of a half-forgotten woman.

2

Papa's third marriage was still a shabby and uncomfortable memory for his children by Iron Jock's daughter.

When Bluebell came home from boarding school she got the impression of a man subdued and even sweetened by his second experience of the widower's state. Far from Garvel, always summering in the pleasant vacuum of Inverquey, she had not realized how soberly Papa had set about establishing himself as a useful citizen of middle-age. He had stood for the Ninth Ward in the Town Council and been duly elected without opposition in that agreeable residential district, and when she was at home Bell was interested to find him extremely serious about his committee responsibilities in the matters of Gas and Cleansing. She learned that he had become chairman of the Garvel

Conservative Association, and that there was even talk of his standing for the constituency in the General Election of 1906. She saw his name high up among those of Patrons, Presidents and Chairmen in the lists of subscribers which collectors for voluntary organisations so frequently left at the door. You could have said (as the *Garvel Courier* frequently did) that Papa was ready to patronize any worthy cause of local interest, and that the legend "Julius W. I. Oliphant, Esq., Agincourt . . . £10 10s." was the sign-manual of his position. "Perhaps a future Provost," the *Courier* had once gone so far as to say.

Bluebell had, indeed, been home from school only a few days when she was called by Papa to an interview she found in her young womanhood genuinely moving and impressive.

Papa had changed a good deal. His face was still noble, but it could not be denied that he was growing fatter, bluffer. It was in this phase of middle-age that he started to cultivate the auburn moustache that had the agreeable result of letting him hear his appearance likened to that of the Duke of Connaught or this musical chap, Sir Edward Elgar. He took Bluebell into his confidence, as a near-equal. They actually had tea together.

"Now I'll have to ask you to take some responsibility for the house, Bluebell. There are plenty of servants, but they want watching all the time. It's scandalous the poor return you get for good wages and living conditions. Then poor little Rose Anne is still a baby. Bridget's pretty good with her, of course, but I wouldn't trust that nurserymaid the length of my foot. Of course, the house is quieter these days," he sighed as one heavily stricken by fate, "but we'll have to do our share of entertaining now that you and the older boys are home. I'd like to see more young people coming about the house."

His sober resignation was convincing, and the natural woman in his daughter warmed to him in his loneliness. The house was quiet indeed these days. The laughter of big Bill Hercus and his pals was heard no more, for there had in fact been some unpleasant misunderstandings and even recriminations over the death of Kate and the financial clauses of the Marriage Contract. It was then that Papa built his workshop in the stable wing and devoted himself assiduously to the woodworking arts. Bluebell, who had been lonely long enough, flourished in his confidence.

Years later she was to find herself looking back wistfully on that brief period of calm in the life of the family. There was a serenity about those days of dances, tennis parties, yachting cruises, flirtations, and one visit to London each year, staying at Brown's Hotel and going up in the Flip-Flap at the Franco-British Exhibition, with some grave but vague talk by Papa about having her presented at Court. Neither discomfort nor unkindness made claims on a young creature

with any zest for life, and conscience and revolt were soothed by the mild, smooth interest of it all. Sometimes the adult Bluebell upbraided herself, remembering how rarely she crossed the water to visit Betty Bell, as she was free to do now that Papa had turned so quiet. It was as if she used Betty only as her cushion against the hard things.

Sparkling blue on the Firth and the smell of good cooking coming up from the *Iolanthe's* galley to whet a healthy girl's appetite ; some thirty bright girls and boys in white for tea and tennis on the green lawns and under the deeper green coinfers at Inverquey ; munching sandwiches and drinking claret cup in a butt while a cold wind ripped across the moors above Kinlochmaam ; the hot, awkward kiss of a young naval officer from the guardship under the caterer's palms in a tiled corridor of the Town Hall—a hundred such flashes of memory composed the glowing picture of the era on which the curtain of ugliness was to fall so abruptly.

Papa threw his news at Ambrose and Bluebell as, having partaken of Communion, they were returning from Church one wet September morning.

" By the way, you two," he said, hostile in his uneasiness, " I think I should tell you now that I am getting married shortly. It's all going to be very quiet, and you will please keep it quiet. But perhaps you'd better let the children and the servants know what's happening."

This he announced as they were turning in between the gates of Agincourt, and the trio marched up the drive, three small, separate troubled worlds, each under its own dripping umbrella, all uncomfortably silent.

It was the silence of shame, implicit from the first in Papa's harsh announcement, the silence that admitted a grievous wound in the soft body of respectability, and except among the eagerly-tattling servants it was miserably maintained in Agincourt. All Garvel soon had it, of course, that old Juley was at it again and rejoiced to learn in the event that the actual ceremony was a lawyer's transaction, hurried through before a Sheriff in chambers in the city. It noted with secret glee, with much sinister jesting in the clubs and an even more luscious pursing of lips over afternoon tea-tables, that the marriage was announced in two-and-a-half enigmatic lines in the *Glasgow Herald*, and that the appearance of the child, six months later, was the matter of a still curter and much belated notice. The birth was announced as having taken place at a remote address in the Western Isles.

It was a muddle and a folly from the beginning, this third marriage of Papa's. Harriet Macdonald dwelt among them in Agincourt for less than a year all told, so that she never took on any reality for her nearly grown-up daughter-in-law. She was large, plump, sallow, simpering, generous of spirit and stupid, with straight, dampish,

always untidy black hair. The appointments and assumptions of the great villa in Garvel were beyond her. She might have come as an under-nursemaid, Bluebell often thought in later days. You could not dislike her, and you could not be interested in her for herself: you just tried to be decent, all the more because the Boys were invariably rude to her in their class-conscious way. Papa never explained her at all. Bluebell discerned in her step-mother, more of her own age than her father's, a lonely Highland girl, a thought over-sexed, who had been too much infatuated with her dream of the wealth and glitter of the big towns.

Something of this she learned from Harriet herself, more from the gossip that infallibly came round to her. The woman had been the daughter of a Hebridean innkeeper, whose house was popular with cruising yachtsmen. They had dirtily nicknamed her Hot Harriet; she was always such a come-hither fool when the well-to-do sports barged possessively into the bar she served. It even came to his daughter's ears that the yachting boys mirthfully wondered that old Juley should have been caught by such a stupid big lump of sex. Wee Darcy Greig the lawyer's bubbling suggestion, that "Old Juley was always a dam' bad chooser," was duly passed to her by a righteous spinster lady collecting for the Female Benevolent: a lady who, at the same moment making a pass at eating a cream cookie through her spotted veil, expressed herself as being disgusted that people should say such horrible things, and that other people should put them about.

The mature Bluebell did not think bitterly of Papa. A fool he was, but fools were in the order of things as she had perceived them. She divined that his need for the comfort and admiration of women was profound among his weaknesses, and she tolerantly guessed that even out of his shabby affair with the innkeeper's daughter he had honestly hoped to found a new, secure, domestic order. He had simply not possessed the sense nor the taste, nor even the self-protective wisdom, to perceive in his panic that Harriet Macdonald was not for mansions on both sides of the Firth, not for the command of wealth and servants.

The trouble with men like Papa was that they could see hardly an inch before their noses. Since wealth could span all the gorges they might expect to encounter, they were short of sight. Papa had not perceived that by placing such a girl in Agincourt, to be despised even by the kitchenmaid, he was fating her to be despised by himself! Bluebell could never fully understand the complex of motives that had induced him to marry Harriet. Fear was among them assuredly, but she knew for a certainty that he would have done better for everybody to buy himself out of his fix. It wouldn't have cost so much as

what he was paying for the motor-cars the Boys were clamouring to possess.

On what terms Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant and Harriet Macdonald lived together nobody but themselves ever knew with certainty. It was as if Papa and his third wife lived in an annexe apart. That was the time when Jerome was sent off in disgrace to Australia and Ambrose was learning to be a stockbroker. Bluebell remembered how she herself found frequent excuses to go staying with friends. The women of the house knew only that the marriage had been a mistake. Little Rose Anne was young enough to delight in the easy, untidy company of her new Mummie, as the term had been carefully invented, and Harriet seemed to like the odd, lumpish creature. Bluebell and Bridget were friendly for pity and the sake of peace.

The marriage had still been a mistake. Harriet went home to her parents in the Isles to bear her child : her own sentimental choice, it was suggested and half-believed. The little girl, christened Caristiona in the Gaelic way, was but three months old when Harriet felt the need to see her people again. Papa was to follow in the *Iolanthe* and bring her home.

That was the last her step-children ever knew of Harriet Macdonald, the untidy, unhappy visitant. Ambrose was called to the funeral by wire and, a simple creature, returned with a circumstantial, almost romantic, story of how Harriet had gone visiting friends on the neighbouring isle and, returning across the tidal ford in the half-light, had been overtaken by both flood and quicksands like so many simple wayfarers before her. To Bluebell, thinking over these sombre things as she sat forlorn and now shivering on the edge of her bed, it was even stranger to think that Harriet had been remotely buried in an island kirkyard, high-walled against the Atlantic winds, and that her name was never cut on the great granite stone in Garvel Cemetery under which Flora Gillanders and Kate Hercus lay side by side in their strange *post mortem* companionship.

Anger and suspicion die. Bluebell at thirty years of age thought of Harriet Macdonald only as the last of Papa's spasmodic efforts to equate himself with the reasonably normal life. From that last, specific point of failure he had started to build about himself the refuge from which he would emerge only at intervals, to be either a man's man or an urbane public benefactor—Commodore at a regatta during the Fortnight, the life and soul of a South African Veterans' smoker, layer of a foundation stone, chairman at a charity concert. (On special occasions involving speeches he employed Andy Ballingall, the hunch-backed and alcoholic reporter-editor of the *Courier*, to draft his orations for him.) The foundations of the West Room were being dug before the mound of turf over Harriet Macdonald's grave had

begun to merge with the original sea-grasses on the sandy soil about it.

Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant needed women and yet had failed with women. Now he reduced his claims on the sex, demanding of it only the housekeeping functions. The short summer of Bluebell's confidence with Papa after Kate Hercus's death was closed. He chose to go off into his own night, and the curtain was down between father and daughter. Not long of age, the girl saw herself bound to a service subtly but powerfully imposed.

On the night of Papa's funeral, deciding that she might at least lie down and starting to undress—she would hear about the children from Bridget when she went along to the bathroom in her dressing-gown—Bluebell paused before the reflection of a strained face in her mirror to wonder why even these Oliphant menfolk about her had not perceived, had assuredly not allowed for, the depth of her passion for Jack Alston. They had known about it. They had even said, hoping that she would overhear and be corrected, things like "That Alston chap—the solicitor fellow—brainy by his way of it—but definitely not a gentleman. Definitely not." The West Room projected a policy in these matters.

There had never come out of the West Room any sort of recognition of the power of love. The Boys disliked the concept. It was too much like giving away something for nothing. And even now, when the Boys had had a dam' good dinner and were probably playing Snooker while Papa's corpse corrupted on the hill above, Bluebell did not know for certain whether Jack Alston was a prisoner of war, as she desperately hoped, or just another bundle wrapped in a brown Army blanket under the slag-heaps of Loos and Lens. His last letter was dated September 21, 1915. His handwriting was so clear and yet so idiosyncratic in the manner of a real person. The thin paper was bleaching at the edges now. Her occasional hopes were desperate indeed.

3

Bluebell could never determine the nature of her brothers' relationships with women.

She had been brought up to regard the subject as indecent and any secret thinking about it as a manifestation of vice in the individual; and until she fell in love with Jack Alston it troubled her little enough as a personal issue. Then, sensitized by the wildness of the disturbance of her own body and mind, seeing with dreadful clarity the nature of the conflict as between the passionate impulse and the discipline of the social system, she came to understand that her own dilemma was

an outcome of sex to a large extent: a sexual even more than a social problem.

On the very point of her final decision, lying awake late on the night of her skirmish with Jerome, the bottle of aspirins by her bedside failing her, the problem unfolded itself in her aching head with the clarity of a theorem in geometry. Papa, now dead and buried with a hundredweight of spring flowers still fresh on his grave, had enunciated the proposition with his uxorious weakness, culminating in that obviously shabby affair with poor Harriet Macdonald. Now the Boys, using women only as handservants, hewers of wood and drawers of water, had decisively withdrawn into deliberate bachelorhood in the West Room. Therefore . . .

But the *quod erat demomstrandum* still eluded her. Bluebell had confided in Betty Bell and had received from that decisive woman—now middle-aged, tart, successful and a thought impatient with the muddled young—a cool discourse on the distinction as between lust and love: a distinction which depressed Bluebell by its insistence on the fact that only a few men, as distinct from most women, were capable of utter devotion. Betty also pointed out that wealth and the increasingly acute sense of social position must be the enemies of love.

"I could almost compromise myself, Bell," she said. "I could almost accept John Galt's compromise of "a solid cordiality" between spouses as the truth of the whole business. But I'm still desperately in love with Calum, and he's a wonderful lover to me. Would you spit in your father's face and throw away your fortune for this lad of yours? Would you never speak to me again if I stood between you and the boy? That's the test."

But it was not by any means so easy as all that; nor did the new books on psychology help much with the special problem. Papa had placed too many shackles on his children.

There was the root of the matter, as Bluebell saw it while she reached out for still another cigarette and the jewelled watch on her wrist gave the time as ten minutes to one. Two things were clear—and it was something to get something clear in the muddle of living. The prime curse was too much unearned money, with all the dull security of doing or even thinking its possession involved. It was equally certain that the Boys, garrisoning the West Room against all-comers, had been fashioned into that exclusiveness by Papa and the influence, however subconscious, of Papa's disappointing experiences in marriage.

Even so—and at this point of her torture, her light out again, Bluebell turned over on her other side tempestuously, twisting the lovely, strong Irish linen that still survived from Mama's trousseau—even so: Papa and the Boys insisted on rules of their own. Bluebell

thought bitterly of the most difficult and inimical among her brothers, Jerome : the one who cracked his fingers and laid down the law in curt phrases.

She had never been allowed to know the whole truth about his affair with Tottie Dykes. It was not the sort of thing a young lady in her position ought to know, and the West Room was solid round one of the sodality in a spot of trouble. It was not, however, by any means the trivial affair Papa and the Boys had pretended it to be. Bluebell could perceive that Papa was worried and flustered, fearful for his position in the small world of Garvel, and that the Boys were alarmed over the grave consequences which could follow just such a little bit of fun as any chap might be expected to have. It was just poor old Jerome's dam' bad luck that he had been caught.

Bluebell remembered Tottie Dykes—an over-dressed, ambitious wench with good legs lavishly displayed and a pretty, gypsy face. The trouble in Tottie's case was that she was no street-walker, not even the tobacconist's assistant of tradition, but the only daughter of Nairn Dykes, a grave master slater and plasterer of the town and one of Papa's colleagues on the Council. Probably Jerome had picked her up at the new Roller Skating Rink in Kempock ; probably the girl seriously aimed at marriage to a handsome young man so highly placed as one of the Oliphants. Bluebell never knew with certainty, though she found herself curious to the point of morbidity about the elements of pathos and even tragedy in this small, conventional episode of the social comedy.

One Saturday afternoon, from the drawing-room window, she saw the girl's father pass down the drive after an interview with Papa, and the little picture so moved her that she remembered it all her days as a symbol of life's silly sadness. She noted, as if they had special significance, the good grey suit and bowler hat the man wore, his stout black boots, and the silver-mounted walking-stick he carried. Nairn Dykes was rather tall and of decidedly good features, but Bluebell thought to see in his figure the symbolic little man of supreme respectability at odds with the wealth and power he had been brought up to honour. When the fuss was over, and the lawyers had done ; when Jerome was safely away by P. & O. to Australia, she knew in her heart that legal action and open scandal had been averted only by the upright, Radical, God-fearing good sense of Tottie's father.

The affair blew over. The gossip of the town found a new focus. Tottie Dykes made a decent marriage in due course to a chief engineer in the Clan Line, and by what process of adoption the last child by one of the male line of the Oliphants was spirited away Bluebell never learned. Sometimes she could sardonically amuse herself by reflecting it was at least something that one of the Boys could go so far towards

creative action as to father a child. Like so many other things, apparently important at the time, the affair of Tottie Dykes fell into the perspective of the insignificant except in Agincourt and, no doubt, in the semi-detached home of Nairn Dykes.

Jerome in Australia became actually one of the prouder legends of the West Room, and Papa's small store of conversational gambits was notably augmented.

" My second boy, Jerome—out in Australia, you know—tells me in one of his letters . . ."

With Bluebell the memory of her brother's shabby escapade and its subsequent handling rankled, and was forgotten, and then blazed up again like a dormant ulcer. It was to her of profound and sombre significance in the sexual war she saw developing within the family: Papa and the Boys entrenched in the West Room against the women of the household, with her weak, weaponless self in the middle of the firing line. Papa could have his affair with Harriet Macdonald and Jerome his fling with Tottie Dykes, but when Bluebell Oliphant fell in love with Jack Alston, fell in love almost sexlessly at first with his ideas and idealism, then the guns began to rumble ominously from the fortress. They were ranging on her even before she had started to think of Jack Alston in the terms of love.

Their meeting would have been impossible in the ordinary run of things. Jack Alston was the only son of a sailing ship master, one of the last in history to disappear in the South Atlantic without trace, even as Papa's father had gone with the *Constant Star* in the region of Lat. 30 South and Long. 10 E.

But that was no link; the sense of history did not stir in such as Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant. Oliphants did not meet such as the Alston's of 21 Chapel Street: a flat-faced block of four-apartment tenement houses hard by the cemetery and inhabited by foremen shipwrights, elementary school teachers, small shopkeepers and the like, a distinct smell of tumescent cats always pervading the common stairs. His mother was white-haired, rather consciously refined and penurious, and Jack had got to the Grammar School and then the University by dint of his ability to win bursaries.

Now, at nearly thirty, he was a small, neat, quiet man with a beautifully modelled face, his brown eyes surprisingly well set-off by rimless spectacles. He had been recently adopted junior partner by Watt & Macnicol, Writers and Notaries Public, on the strength of his brilliance as that ancient firm's procurator and his possession of brains and character of sufficient worth to persuade old Dan Macnicol that since his own two sons had gone to the dogs, he might at least secure the continuity of his firm by taking in this modest paragon of intelligence, industry, caution and incredible trustworthiness.

"You could leave that chap with an open cheque for ten thousand pounds," declared Dan Macnicol over his third double whisky in the Yacht Club one night. "You could give him the keys of the safe and a thousand in cash, and I'm damned if the fellow wouldn't stay in the office till midnight, tidying everything up, squaring the cashier's books, locking everything away. Never seen such a hell of a chap for keeping things in order. Damned if he doesn't boss me! Well, he can boss away if he's going to let me have some of the fun I've missed since poor old Ecky Watt died!"

Bluebell met him at the Soup Kitchen down by the West Docks. That was in 1908, when things were bad in the shipyards. It was permissible for even an Oliphant girl to help in the soup kitchen; it was in fact one of the done things, especially when the Lady Rosaline Wedderspoon herself came cruising out of the aristocratic remoteness of Gallowbrae to be organiser-in-chief, controlling the affairs of the kitchens in the parade-ground voice she had inherited from her father, a corps commander in the Indian Army, and developed in years of battle with native servants and the competitive memsahibs of Lahore, Simla and Srinagar. Papa headed the local list of subscriptions with a cool £500. It was agreed that it was going to be a damned bad winter for the working class, especially the children, if the right people didn't do something about it, and you had to watch that those Socialists didn't make capital out of a temporary set-back in trade.

It was the order at first that Bluebell should be driven to the West Docks kitchen and brought back again in one of John Mackenna's four-wheelers. As often as was possible, or convenient, one of the Boys would turn up to take her home out of the slums and through the tangle of dark, dirty streets around Murray's Sugarhouse.

That urgency passed, however. The Boys did not always find it convenient to pick Bluebell up at that stinking hole at an hour so early as 10 p.m.; and just as his daughter's interest strengthened in what she was seeing for the first time of poverty and its problems, so did Papa's fear of unrest through poverty gradually decline. It was the miracle of the soup kitchen phase that, as could have happened in no other conceivable circumstances, Bluebell began to enjoy independence of movement for the first time in her life.

Jack Alston entered her consciousness with the inevitability of a phenomenon. She was at first struck by the fact that he was by far the youngest of the few men who worked among so many women in the Soup Kitchen; the rest were elderly doers of good by profession. He was always there, and she learned that he was on duty six nights a week as against her own two. She saw how his efficiency, his mere genius for order, could moderate the tantrums of the aggressively poor demanding their rights, and straddle the still more difficult problem

of keeping a voluntary organisation going through a welter of female jealousies. It was not that he shouted or gave orders or assumed the right to command. He was quiet to a degree. He just went on doing the right thing at the right time ; and sometimes, watching him and considering the nature of his dominance, Bluebell thought that his must be the true function of genius. The power of synthesis, she decided, was the right phrase.

One night there was a first-class row between Mrs. Hugh Cairns of Glenfield and the Lady Rosaline. The Lady Rosaline was the boss of the whole charitable system, but Mrs. Hugh Cairns could not easily brook criticism of her management of the West Docks kitchen, especially by a matron who drove up in a car, had a quick look round, and then made loud, derogatory remarks about something she knew nothing about. The row started with an exchange of politely acidulated phrases. Then one of the disputants used an unfortunate word in a personal application. The other retorted with heat, and all the sanctions of rank and courtesy suddenly went down in a blaze.

Bluebell, drying dishes, was the sole witness of this regrettable scene. An underling in the Soup Kitchen service, an innocent in warfare of the sort, not yet fully aware of the fact that power invariably corrupts its possessor, she felt extremely unhappy and completely helpless as the middle-aged ladies flamed and spat at each other.

The small, neat figure of Jack Alston came through the door from the outer room.

" If you don't mind me suggesting it, Lady Rosaline and Mrs. Cairns," he said quietly, " we've still got a lot of work outside. There must be at least a hundred people still waiting. If we could perhaps postpone the discussion until to-morrow . . ."

" A hundred, you say ? " bellowed the Lady Rosaline.

" Gracious ! " cried Mrs. Hugh Cairns of Glenfield.

They hurried out together. Bluebell, still busy with her dish-cloth, turned to Jack Alston with a smile.

" Thank you, Mr. Alston ! That was becoming somewhat trying."

" So wasteful ! " he replied impatiently. " We're sitting on the edge of a volcano, and all they can do is quarrel about precedence."

" A volcano ? What do you mean by that ? "

The mild brown eyes behind the rimless spectacles regarded Bluebell with interest.

" A volcano ? Yes : in the strictest political sense. Revolution, if you like ; and they're not really ready for it. But don't worry, Miss Oliphant. All you and I have to do is to try to keep a lot of women and children from starving. . . . Pardon me. I must go out and see that our two dowagers aren't quarrelling over the ladles."

One night, facing alone the twisting route homewards through

the slums and then the long pull uphill through the empty suburban streets, Bluebell hesitated in the doorway. It was raining hard, the gusts from the sou'-west slashing along the pavements and all the gutters and waste-pipes dripping and gurgling. The wan light from a broken mantle in a steet-lamp seemed more ominous than the true darkness of the mean streets. She was glad to hear the quiet voice behind her.

"Have you no umbrella, Miss Oliphant? You must let me offer you a share of mine. Or I could call in at Mackenna's and get a cab sent down."

"I'd rather like to walk after the heat and the smells in there. If it is not too far out of your way."

It had cleared again, with patches of starry sky, before they reached the upper levels of the town, and they stood for a few minutes outside the gates of Agincourt, laughing a little over the foibles of their beneficiaries and those who worked with them in the soup kitchen. As they stood there a man came along the terrace from the east, hesitated to peer at them in the light of the twin street-lamps, then turned into the drive. It was Ambrose; and as she followed him up the drive Bluebell's mind was uneasy. His turn away had seemed a significant gesture.

Papa came at her out of the West Room as she was finishing a cup of tea in the old sewing-room. The signs of his evening's drinking were on his flushed and fattening face, and she knew that this humiliation was going to be extreme, as so often during her childhood. She rose to face him, thankful for the breadth of the table between them.

"What's this I hear?" he started shouting right away. "Hanging about the gates like a skivvy with this cheapskate lawyer chap and making a confounded noise in the streets for every Tom, Dick and Harry to hear?"

"Papa!" she protested. "Who told you such an extraordinary, cruel story?"

"Never mind who told me. I've suspected this long enough. And it's got to stop."

"What has got to stop?" She could have cried for the brutal unreason of it all, but anger helped her to be calm. "Nothing has ever started, Papa. Mr. Alston saw me home, if that is what you mean. It was raining heavily, and for the very first time since I met him he kindly offered me the shelter of his umbrella."

"That's your story."

"My story—against Ambrose's. And Ambrose heard us making a noise in the street! How sickening!"

Her contemptuous bitterness gave Papa the stimulus his indignation was beginning to require.

"Don't dare to talk to me like that!" he bawled. "That's quite enough. This nonsense has got to stop here and now, I say. You'll drop that fellow at once, my girl, or I'll know the reason why."

He banged out of the room, and Bluebell sank into her chair again. It was almost beyond belief. Now these frightened, stupid men in the West Room were at once locking her out and locking her in; and in her bitter loneliness of spirit she sat for a long time, aching to run away to the protective wisdom of Betty Bell, or, as her sub-conscious yearning had been revealed to herself in these few moments of stress, into the arms of Jack Alston.

4

Ten years later it remained a puzzle in Bluebell's mind that she had never come to dislike Ambrose for all the harm he had done her. Jerome, though weak at the core, was sharper and cleverer by far, a more complex and interesting person, and yet she hated him. With Ambrose it was his quality of almost classic stupidity that made him no more hateful than a Shorthorn bullock.

Bluebell even smiled to remember how Rose Anne, that subtle child, had once come on the draft of a letter written by Ambrose on a matter of business and brought it mischievously for her half-sister to see. It was very naughty and mean of them, but for weeks on end the two girls could pass into fits of giggling over the unformed boyish handwriting, the mis-spellings, the wandering, vague sentences and, withal, the immense pomposity of poor Ambrose's attitudes. It was the work of one beyond the reach of any known educational process, and no woman could wholly dislike, however much she might despise, a being of such monumental stupidity. If one had not been under obligation to live in the same house with him, one's life continually influenced by his follies, one could perhaps have even rejoiced in Ambrose as a comic character on the Dickensian level.

But you could not, at thirty, laugh to think that Papa, especially as the years of self-indulgence began to leave their marks on him, was perhaps not much brighter than his first-born. It was wholly strange, pathetic, tragic, funny—according to mood—that these two between them started the process whereby the very mainstay of their pride and prejudice, the Oliphant fortune, began to dwindle even as Mr. Lloyd George's Budgets intimated the beginning of the end of inherited wealth.

Ambrose in his capacity of stockbroker remained a comic memory. At three o'clock on the morning of March 20, 1918, Bluebell sat up in bed, switched on her light again, lit a cigarette and laughed over

it, but kindly. Her elder brother's brief career in business had been started and spent in conditions of such consequence as might have surrounded the movements of an ambassador.

Almost every evening in those distant days there reached her by remote communication from the West Room a reminder, as housekeeper by tacit co-option, that Ambrose had to be up early next day. Each morning his breakfast had to be on the table by 8.15—" a dam' grisly hour, if you ask me," said Papa, proud of his boy's professional application. At ten minutes to nine Wilkins, the chauffeur, brought the big Napier to the door to bear Ambrose to the 9.05 at the West Station and, with the stationmaster's anxious co-operation, his favourite seat on the off-side, back to the engine, in the middle compartment. If he failed to secure it there was apt to be a row, involving even the womenfolk at Agincourt in the evening.

" Never could face the way the train's going. Makes me as sick as a dog. And this was just some damned English tourist ! I gave Barrie a piece of my mind, I can tell you."

The process of Ambrose's evening return was much the same in reverse, except that, as the women saw it, there must be boiling hot water to wash the heat and dust of the city off his plump body when he came home off the 5.14, and that the dinner-hour must be moved back from 7.30 p.m. to seven sharp . . . " And when I say sharp, I mean sharp," said Papa. " The poor chap's bound to be peckish after that dam' long day in the city."

It was different on Saturdays, of course, when Ambrose slept late and rested from his labours. The only domestic urgency then was so to arrange his specially early lunch that he would be on the first tee at the Golf Course by 1.30 sharp. So many damned tradesmen were taking up the game, a fellow could never be sure of getting away in time to complete a comfortable round on a winter's afternoon.

Detached from the intensity of masculine life in the West Room, concerned only to keep the household going with as little cause for complaint as possible, Bluebell never dreamed that the activities of Ambrose could be of importance. At nearly twenty she had already perceived the element of the comic in her brother's position. It was just one of those things that men did : one of those things Papa and the Boys were bound to turn into a drama, just as they could dramatize the purchase of a 7-foot dinghy into a major deal in shipping.

Her own instinct—perhaps as weak as theirs, when she came to think of it after the lapse of ten years—was excessively to dramatize the sorrows of the neglected housekeeping woman. It was all very much of a muddle to the mature Bluebell, who stubbed out her cigarette in a crystal ash-bowl, already too full of ends and cinders to

be anything but revolting to that tidy mind which was the source of all her discontent.

You could go on and on, thinking, darting up the innumerable side-alleys of thought and memory ; but Bluebell specially remembered that night long ago when Ambrose, young and eager though beginning to take on flesh, earnestly introduced her to the workings of high finance. Papa was in London, and Ambrose had genially proposed that they might take coffee in the Library together.

" The fact is, Bell, I can put you in the way of earning a very nice little pot of money if you feel like having a flutter."

" Money, Ambrose ? But where on earth would I get money to start with ? "

" My dear girl," he tolerated her feminine simplicity, " haven't you got a whacking great legacy coming to you from Grandpa Gillanders' estate ? "

" Yes, but that's all tied up. I don't even touch the income till I'm twenty-one."

" Good heavens ! Don't you realize you could raise oodles from the bank or the insurance people on your expectations ? Now, if you were to lay your hands on a couple of thou, or even just one, I'll undertake you get it back four or five times over inside the year."

Ambrose's grand manner invited her admiration of his power ; and she always had that sneaking fondness for him.

" That's wonderful, Ambrose ! " she dutifully exclaimed. " But how ? "

" Rubber."

" Rubber ? "

" Yes, rubber."

" Hot-water bags and things ? "

" Yes : and motor-car tyres, and doormats, and bicycle pumps, and rubber gloves—millions of things. There's a terrific future in rubber. What you probably don't realize, Bell, is that the huge rubber plantations which were laid out in the Straits Settlements and places like that four or five years ago are just coming into production ; and I can tell you here and now that if you get into one of the big owning companies on the ground floor you're on velvet, absolute velvet. Like taking pennies off a blind man."

" Gracious ! " exclaimed Bell dutifully.

" Of course," Ambrose proceeded in his big way, " my firm is right inside absolutely the best information ; and I don't mind telling you that if you can raise a couple of thou, or even only one, I can get you into a group of shares that's going to make Vallams and Johores look silly, absolutely silly. Do you want the tip ? "

Ambrose winked knowingly, and Bluebell responded in the spirit she hoped would please him.

"It's terribly good of you, Ambrose."

"Well—Dunedin Dyak."

"What an exciting name!"

"Well, you see, it's an Edinburgh firm really. The directors are some of the most solid chaps over there—Writers to the Signet and all that. Papa knows most of them; and I don't mind telling you Papa's going into the thing in a pretty big way. My reckoning is that, if you were to put in a couple of thou at par—or just the one if you like—you'll be selling at 84 inside six months. As for the Dyak bit," added Ambrose, "I suppose it's one of those native words meaning something or other."

"Probably," agreed Bell, unable to keep out of her tone the edge of irony that would keep cutting into her dealings with Papa and the Boys.

"Well, what about it, Bell?" asked Ambrose, eager as a child begging to go on a picnic.

"It's wonderfully good of you, Ambrose," she said, "but I don't think I should. You see: I don't understand these things properly, and I know that Grandpa would hate me messing his money about."

"Good God! The old man's dead and buried—how long is it now?"

"Nearly six years. But I do think, Ambrose," Bell persisted, "that I ought to keep just what Grandpa left me. After all, I don't want any more money, do I?"

Ambrose gaped at her, his mouth working like that of a fish.

"I'll be damned!" he said, adding gravely: "I can only tell you this, Bell. You're making a big mistake, and you'll be jolly sorry you didn't take my tip. You're chucking away money, oodles of it. Absolute oodles!"

Poor Ambrose! You could not tell him that all his enthusiasms must be suspect. He could not possibly know that, speaking largely of getting money and making money, he touched the rawest spot on the skin of almost any dependent woman, married or single; money all about her, perhaps money even lavished on her comfort and decoration, but none in her own control.

She was to hear a lot about money during the period of Ambrose's adventures in stockbroking. If it wasn't Dunedin Dyaks and Johores and Anglo-Sumatras, it was this damned chap Lloyd George and his confounded Budget. The death duties away up sky-high, and Income Tax at one and twopence in the pound—*one and two*, I ask you! Then all this ninepence for fourpence nonsense. Papa sarcastically supposed that he ought to offer Wilkins the chauffeur the best bedroom and a

quarter of his own income right away and be done with it. Thank heaven the Lords could keep that damned old fool Asquith in order, and you could always trust old Teddy, God bless him!

The trouble Papa and the Boys had was to know how the next chap, the Prince of Wales, would stand up to the Radicals. He was our Sailor Prince, as Papa reminded the family from time to time, and Papa was prepared to lay even money that no son of old Teddy's could be an absolute dam' fool. The fact remained that he was a small chap with the extraordinary habit of having his trousers creased up the sides instead of fore-and-aft; and it couldn't be said that he had the old man's experience of handling Frenchmen and people like that. Fellows who took an intelligent interest in things had a good deal to worry about one way and another; and there was always those confounded Pankhurst women raging up and down the country like wild cats. There would be some *real* forcible feeding, if Papa had his way of it.

Looking back over ten years, Bluebell could not be sure that she had the order of all these strange and significant movements right in her mind or even that she had appreciated their significance while they were in being. What she did know for certain was that, in her loneliness and helplessness, she had had during these years an anxious and yet expectant feeling often upon her. She worried to hear so much talk of money, of making more money and of evading the payment of taxation on money; as if the Oliphant fortune was not enough and men like Papa and the Boys must take up this complicated business of stocks and shares, debentures and margins, as if it were some new and fashionable sort of sport like Diabolo or the card-game of Pit, over which they roared and quarrelled in the West Room almost every night for a space.

You could never really tell what of the sense of the past was true memory and what knowledge acquired since the event. There was no doubt at all, however, of the dismal reality of that November day when the first real awareness of loss and failure seeped like the fog outside along the lobbies and through the rooms of Agincourt.

The fog was histrionically so right. It followed a dark day of persistent drizzle and a muggy windless night. In the early hours of the morning Bluebell wakened to hear the distant belching of the horns of the Riccar Light. As she rose to dress, always thinking of Ambrose's early breakfast and the Napier waiting at the door, she heard the bells and bellows of the ships anchored in the Deeps beating and groaning their skippers' apprehensions.

She found herself anxious. This morning misery was the confirmation of an anxiety that had queerly come upon her the evening before, when Ambrose came home early from the city, and there were no

loud calls from the West Room for service, and Hannah, tactfully questioned by Bridget at Bluebell's instance, declared, "Ye'd think they'd a' been quarrelling. They're in a right huff, the lot of them." The apprehension, as reasonable or unreasonable as any belief in ghosts, grew when she heard Papa and the Boys go up to their rooms at the remarkably early hour of eleven. And then Bluebell was left to gather that, on this foggy morning, Ambrose would not be travelling to Glasgow as usual.

She was called to meet Papa in the Library at noon, and then she saw for certain that he had been stricken. That pasty face, those eyes darkly ringed, the grave indecision of his speech were not in the old order of alcoholic tantrum or even of the bogus pathos he sometimes employed.

"Take a seat, Bell," he said. "I've got rather bad news for you."

"I am very sorry, Papa," she returned sincerely.

"We've taken a bit of a knock financially," Papa went on. "You wouldn't quite understand, but some investments of ours haven't turned out just as we expected. In fact, we've lost a good deal more money than we can easily afford."

"I'm sorry," she repeated, for once admiring Papa for not indignantly piling all the blame on Ambrose.

"So what I wanted to consult you about was what economies we might manage in the house—and at Inverquey, of course. I'm sure we can cut down on some things. You will know better than I, but I don't mind telling you that even a few pounds a week will help."

It occurred to Bluebell irrelevantly that Papa and the Boys were slaves to this silly trope about not minding to tell anybody about anything, but she was more profoundly touched by Papa's meekness in defeat.

"We can certainly save a lot of money," she said decisively. "I wouldn't like to turn all the girls out suddenly, but I've always thought we had far too many. Let me see . . . Bridget, Cook, Hannah and I . . . Give me till to-morrow, Papa, and I'll make out a proper list."

"That would do. Certainly, Bell, certainly. Thank you."

He was dull in his set-back and off his guard, but it was without malice that Bluebell made her point.

"You understand, Papa, that we are really running two establishments as it is. Frankly, the West Room takes all the time of one woman, and if we must have all those separate meals at different times in different rooms, well——"

"Quite right, Bell! You work it all out and let me see how we can cut down."

"And there's all that outside staff," she added, warming to the interest of the problem. "I'm sure we don't need so many gardeners.

And do we really need four motor-cars and two men to look after them ? "

" No, Bell. I don't suppose we do, now you mention it."

" When you come to think of it," she swept on, " we have more than twenty servants between here and Inverquey. If you take in the yachts in summer, especially the *Iolanthe*, we're paying wages to nearly fifty. It's preposterous ! "

" Damned awful, isn't it ! " agreed Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant heavily, adding on a gust of hope : " You go ahead, Bell. I've a lot of confidence in your judgment about these things."

O, dear ! O, dear ! In their setbacks stupid men always came blubbering to the woman they ignored while the sun was shining. It was one of Bluebell's wryest thoughts in after years that the revolution in the Oliphant family's way of living was contrived largely in terms laid down by herself at the age of twenty or thereabouts.

The emotion engendered by her interview with Papa dwindling, she had not thought that the crisis was so devastating as he made it out to be. She was herself afraid of money and therefore inclined to panic at any hint of the loss of security it meant to her, but she mistrusted the melodramatic emotionalism of Papa and the Boys. Take away an accustomed bon-bon dish of salted almonds from the spread that went with sherry in the West Room, and there was a scene, with at least one of the menfolk almost screaming. Bluebell could bitterly foresee Bridget and herself scrubbing floors in the house while the service of the West Room retained its supreme priority.

It may even have been that the setback was temporary in fact, but the great change did come about in that year of grace 1910, as if the fortunes of the Oliphants passed their peak and went into slow corruption with the bulky person of Edward the Seventh.

It could all have been put down on paper like a Scots lawyer's Account of Charge and Discharge. Odd girls and even old retainers disappeared from both the villa in Garvel and the mansion and grounds at Inverquey. Here a lodge and there a gamekeeper's cottage was closed. The big family Napier remained, but of the three cars owned by the Boys, boasted about by the Boys—an Argyll, a Beeston-Humber and an Arrol-Johnston—two were sold and one was hopefully jacked up against the return of the good times.

Bluebell enjoyed herself during those months of retrenchment. It was in her make-up to rejoice in figures and results. Like the lawyers she made up Cash Accounts very satisfying to herself. At one point she was able to tell herself that she had saved Papa the best part of two thousand a year.

Later on, however, even while still awake on that morning of March, 1918, the sense of history irked her, and she saw that the pro-

cess of decay had not been either so sudden or arbitrary as it had once seemed. It had been a gradual dissolution of power rather than a sudden act of fate. What had seemed sharply important in 1910 appeared commonplace towards the end of the First German War. In March, 1918, with Gough's Army looking like breaking, the imponderable surge of the process took on the greater significance.

Hot-headed in the spring dawn ; her heart pounding ; her eyes sore ; Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant thought to see as significant in all these distant affairs the fact that, after his hopeful dealings in Dunedin Dyaks, her brother Ambrose ceased to be even a stockbroker and became a gentleman of leisure like his father : the very pillar of the West Room. It was even more significant that the *Iolanthe* was not put into commission for the new season and, protected by a sort of penthouse of planks, lay for years at moorings off Geordie Paterson's yard in the West Loch.

5

As Bluebell at thirty considered the tapestry of her life with Papa and the Boys she was never distressed by any sense of irrationality or hardship in the process of the family's slow decline. Her mind, discarding sentimentalities as the years went by, helped by many earnest talks with Jack Alston and much reading of the books he suggested, discerned in the order of events the inevitable working of the rule of cause and effect.

It was remarkable that none of the hard ability of Iron Jock Gillanders reappeared among his only daughter's sons, but not even Gregor Mendel (as Uncle Eustace was fond of pointing out) could lay down laws to suggest the incidence of qualities of the brain, and the Boys were for the most part the pure products of environment.

That Ambrose could not be a sound financier was an assumption anybody but Papa could have made on the most primitive level of speculation. That money which was not worked for, exploited or guarded must dwindle was surely self-evident. That the whole trend of legislation must be towards the taxation of unearned wealth and the limitation of privilege was surely obvious to anybody who had read a little in history or walked through the slums of Garvel—or even heard Betty Bell relate how the impassioned, scornful eloquence of a man called Keir Hardie had disturbed and excited the minds of young people while Victoria still lived.

All that was primitive stuff ; and as it had manifested itself among the Oliphants the process had almost the beauty of an inevitable pattern. Subtlety or mystery, or just the utterly incomprehensible,

entered the theorem when you considered how what the law called the Act of God, *damnum fatale*, manifested itself in tongues of fire one winter evening. Perhaps the Calvinists could have neatly written it off as a Judgment implicit in the process of Predestination, but Bluebell was never soothed by that bleak evasion of mystery. She knew only that the blow came at Papa out of the dark, and that it hurt him bitterly, perhaps even advancing by years—in a perfectly rational calculation—the date of his relatively early death.

It was a beautiful evening, as she remembered clearly. She had herself been up in the attic rooms of Agincourt, sorting out old clothes of Rose Anne's and Chris's for the League of Pity, and had stood long by the open skylight to enjoy the silvern stillness of the darkling Firth, the comfortable beaming of the coastal lights, the playful emergence of the evening stars, spangles on a pearly curtain, and all the familiar world receding into the fairyland state created by a full moon coming up behind the Rock up-river. She was back in the sewing-room when Bridget, who had been parcelling the old clothes, came in. Her face was anxious ; and Bridget was not an excitable woman.

" There's a house on fire on the other side of the water," she said. " It looks to me awful near Inverquey. I think you should have a look, Miss Bell."

They hurried upstairs to the attic window, the smell of frost coming through it on the airs of the night, and they looked at the fire, glowing angrily across miles of water as if a bonfire had been kindled for victory. The fangs of flame curled against a dark hillside under oily clouds of heavier smoke, and now and again a shower of sparks could be seen even across the distance, rising cheerfully from the fire as a roof collapsed.

" It must be Inverquey," said Bell ; adding urgently : " It is ! I know it is. O my God, Bridget ! What . . . The telephone ! "

She knew the lie of the land as she knew in the dark the exact charting of her bedroom furniture. Had it not been one of her lonely pleasures as a child to go up to that attic window and see how the pepper-pot adornments on what was called the Tower Wing of Inverquey House could just be seen from Garvel through a nick in the profile of the Ardhallow peninsula ? The play of flames, smoke and sparks was from behind the spur in the exact position she knew so well. Inverquey was burning, and Papa and the Boys were all away in Edinburgh at one of those motor shows that so oddly enchanted them.

The telephone was stupid and slow, and so was the wife of the Ardhallow village constable at the other end of the line when at length she got through. Och, yes ! It was Inverquey right enough, and was it not a terrible pity ? Yes, her man was away up the road

on his bicycle with as many men as he could gather, but what could they do with a bit pail or two? Och, yes! Her man had telephoned for the county brigade, but dear knows when they would arrive over those hill roads; and the constable's wife wouldn't wonder but what they would have trouble with ice.

Another half-hour of exasperation, and she had traced Papa to the distant lounge of the North British Hotel. She had to shout the news against his testiness; the Oliphant men disliked more than anything to be interrupted in their pleasures by what they called "a pack of women"; but his querulous "Why's?" and "What the devil?" quickly gave place to a dull, stunned reiteration of "My God! O, my God!" Bluebell had the queer feeling of having dealt him a blow over sixty miles of telephone line; she could see him in the box, his eyes wide, his mouth sagging.

"Well, I suppose we'll have to try to get down there," he said at length, dully. "If there's anything to be done at all. Inverquey! My God!"

In Agincourt, forgetting to eat, Bluebell and Bridget watched the fire that was relentlessly consuming a house they had lived in and loved. It was not easy to be patient with people who rang up to say that, in case the Oliphants hadn't noticed it, they were afraid that a house which looked terribly like Inverquey was ablaze on the other side of the water; and was it really Inverquey? And what a pity! It must be awful just to have to watch without being able to do anything. You feel so helpless somehow.

About eight in the evening the fire began to die down. There was a less intense if deeper glow on the undersides of the wreaths of fog that were so brilliantly illuminated from above by the moon. The fire took to flickering fitfully like any domestic fire dying for lack of care. Now it would blaze up in a spurt of falling beams; then it would die away again; and so, like the life of a sick man fluttering to its appointed close, it was all over by ten so far as they could see across a few miles of salt water.

Papa and the Boys came home about midnight, ferried across the Firth in a hired motor-boat; tired, indignant, baffled, frightened. Bluebell met them in the hall. Her heart melted to Papa, ageing and stricken, his face haggard.

"Gutted!" he said. "Absolutely gutted. Inverquey's gone."

"Everything?"

Papa blazed at her.

"Don't stand there asking me dam' fool questions! I tell you the place is gutted."

"Well, not exactly, Bell," mildly interpolated Rupert, the gentle one. "They did manage to save the tower and the rooms below it."

" But how could it start at all, the house empty ? " asked Bluebell, still shocked and sympathetic.

" How did it start ? " bawled Papa, stripping off his frieze overcoat with wild back-swings of his arms. " How the devil could it start but for those damned Suffragettes of yours ? The place was littered with petrol cans. The bitches had even the nerve to leave leaflets behind them. How did it start ? Ach . . ."

As he slumped away Bluebell got one little glance of sympathetic understanding from Rupert's dark, doglike eyes, but as the Boys trooped after Papa towards the West Room she knew that, even in the hour of calamity, she was still a bystander on the edge of their separate world.

6

The steam yacht *Northern Queen* made her way up Loch Stron with all the stateliness suggested by her name. She was of such a length, and her masts and yellow funnel and upperworks stood so high above the water, that even under the Highland hills she had something of the commanding air of a great liner. She was too grand altogether for narrow coastal waters, an observant longshoreman might have felt ; she should have been carrying her indubitably wealthy owner and his guests on a voyage to the South Seas.

She was a beautiful work of man. The sense of poetry had gone to her making. Over their drawing boards the draughtsmen must have been as poets, given the wealth of the world to play with, drunk on the loveliness of line and cadence. As the *Iolanthe* had been the perfect lyric of her period, the *Northern Queen* was the fully-fashioned ode of an art's maturity. She was of the last period before size for its own sake had besotted the mind of man. This yacht was of size indeed, but the ideals of shape and grace still prevailed over that of mere power, and her very largeness was thus a triumph ; so that even Highland shepherds, looking down on her passage from the high tops, somehow felt their hearts lifting to see her shape, as that of a beautiful, tall woman going naked to bed, cut through the waters of the loch and leave a multi-barbed arrow of wave behind.

At her ease in a basket-chair on the afterdeck of the fabulous craft, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant was intensely happy in the circumstances of her voyaging, if not wholly so in her private mind. Now she realized that she had missed these two seasons past the freedom of the waters the *Iolanthe* had given her people. It seemed that when you had been born by tidal water and brought up to use it in boats you always needed the colour and stir of it, its challenges and enchant-

ments, just as a countryman might pine in the city for the sight of a field falling away to a line of trees by a burn and think fondly of the husbandman's eternal battle against rain and frost and storm. Bluebell sat there and rejoiced almost sensually in the noise of salt water thrust aside by the ship's hall, churned up by her twin propellers. She enjoyed the subdued drum of the machinery, even the complex odour of cooking fats and engine oil that could still find its way up from below in a yacht so elaborately ventilated as the *Northern Queen.*

The little unhappiness at the back of Bluebell's mind arose from the fact that she, Papa and Ambrose were the guests of the owner. It was as if they, the Oliphants, had come to the level of the poor relations. She was sorry that Papa and Ambrose had to watch the Fortnight from the deck of another man's ship. Papa, of course, could rationalize it all in one of his wild, dismissive phrases.

" The Fortnight's not what it was," he said, " nor anything like *it.*"

That was true. They had watched *Shamrock* and *White Heather,* two of the last of the great yachts, crashing down the Firth in glory, showing their glistening wet flanks to the weather, their dizzy piles of cream canvas heeling perilously over to the lee, but men knew that they were probably the last of their order and could recall the days when eight vessels in their class would start jockeying at the sound of the warning gun. Taxed wealth was failing to maintain the old splendours against rising costs. The Fortnight not being what it was meant precisely that the Oliphants were not what they had once been in power. Bluebell could be amused, albeit a little sadly, to observe the haste with which Papa and Ambrose would dismiss as laughable the fact that the family name was represented on the racing card, so prettily decorated with little replicas of the racing flags in colour, by Rupert and young Tristram, sailing in a little 19/24 with two equally young and unskilful friends.

The wealth that had created and now maintained the *Northern Queen* so late in the day was out of the newer industrialism. Charlie Manuel was in Bread, in a big way. Only ten years before Papa would have described him as a damned tuppence-ha'penny baker, but Charlie Manuel had such gifts of vision, organisation and drive that the day came when his enormous and painfully hygienic bakeries were mass-producing sufficient loaves to kill the art of breadmaking throughout nearly one-half of Scotland, when the remotest Highland communities went hungry until the familiar hampers came by rail, steamer or carrier with Manuel's Matchless Bread and other cereal products of Manuel's Modern Bakeries, Ltd.

Bluebell liked Charlie Manuel, who was cheerful, shrewd, fresh-complexioned in an innocent way and made no effort to shed a Glasgow accent of redoubtable thickness or conceal a fondness for the

music-hall songs of an easy-going period. It troubled her, however, that Papa had made and cultivated this acquaintance in a spirit almost acquisitive and had, in nearly strict fact, got the baker's hospitality for the Fortnight in exchange for his friendly services as Charlie Manuel's mentor in the art and customs of yachting. It was obvious, though it amused her faintly, that Papa's primitive fancy loved to play with the possibilities of Charlie's only son, Peter.

Papa and Ambrose could be as clumsy and comic as elephants in their approach to this delicate issue.

"He's a nice chap, Peter Manuel," Papa might say at any moment in her presence. "I don't know a boy I've ever liked better. Charming manners. Intelligent, too."

"A good fellow. Brainy! There's no end to the books that chap's read," Ambrose would loyally back his father up. "And money, of course. Rolling in it—oodles of it."

"It's not that," Papa would demur. "It's just that the chap's uncommon decent. Good brain; a good, clear head. That's what I like in a boy."

"Wouldn't be surprised if he went far, that chap. Ambassador or something. I suppose the old man's a certainty for a title?"

"A snip."

Now, as the *Northern Queen* passed regally out of Loch Stron towards the open Firth and her anchorage for the night, Peter Manuel came to the alcove where Bluebell sat out of the wind and, with his pleasant smile, asked if he might draw up a chair beside hers.

The moment was suddenly significant. Often afterwards Bluebell thought that Peter Manuel may have been in much the same case as herself: a young, warm-hearted and rather lonely human being persuaded by a complex of circumstances into a situation that was not at all disagreeable and sentimentally attractive, the urge to face it fed by their nearness as the only two possible mates on the sort of trip that conventionally demanded romantic issues, just as every musical comedy must have its happy ending.

Nature was favouring the venture in her pleasantest way. The glare of the afternoon sun had diminished, and as the ship sped towards her moorings for the night the early evening sun was laying a cloth of amber over the woods and knolls of the Riccar peninsula.

Bluebell liked Peter Manuel. He was of the same slight build as Jack Alston, but a neat little moustache which curled at the ends suggested rather an intelligent subaltern of the Sappers as against the intellectual lawyer. Uppingham had filed off the rough edges of his Scottishness, King's had polished the remaining roughness. His grace in Bluebell's eyes was that he could perceive the comedy in his own situation as between Charlie Manuel, who honestly wanted his son

" to go in for the bakering," and his mother who had once been (and still was, in her sort of refined severity) an elementary school-teacher and dreamed, though quite without romanticism, of seeing her boy in the Foreign Office or at the Bar.

There was quickness in his grey eyes. Bluebell knew that this young man had on his own account studied her and found her not uninteresting. Since the party had assembled in the *Northern Queen* a week before he had been her shadow, his invariable courtesy often softening to confidences and whispers and those other little hints of a special intimacy that are the delightful embroideries of flirtation.

Bluebell was considering the puritan whiteness of the Riccar Lighthouse against the intense green of the trees behind it when she felt her left hand, resting on the arm of her chair, covered by his. She did not withdraw it, but she turned on him a bright, blushing glance of enquiry.

" Yours are lovely hands," he said.

" Are they ? " asked Bluebell, valiantly brisk but a little tremulous in effect.

She withdrew the one he had fondled and held it up before her, the fingers wide apart.

" Not bad, I suppose," she played for time. " It had never occurred to me that they were out of the ordinary. A bit broad at the tips, surely ? "

" They are lovely hands," he insisted.

She caught the expected note of passion in his tone. He switched his chair round. She had dropped her hand back on its original rest. Both his hands closed over it.

" Bell, will you not let me adore them for always ? " he asked. " You and I! . . . We could make a lovely life together."

" O, Peter ! " she wailed, a quavering note of distress in her voice.

" Bell ! Have I worried you ? "

" Yes. No. No, no ! Not you. You are kind. But——"

" I love you."

His forehead came down to rest on the hand he had admired. It was all in the proper order of devotion. But O ! you couldn't know truth from illusion in this business of the sexes. That awful difference between fondness and love ! One step over the hill of emotion, and you were lost ; one moment of pity for this charming young man, one instant of flattered vanity, and you could be untrue to an ideal. Bluebell stroked Peter's bent head and considered what she might most prudently and kindly say.

" You do me a great honour, Peter," she contrived to phrase it at length. " The queer thing is that I know you and I would be contented together. But when you say *love* . . . Love's a terrible thing."

Peter raised his head, and his grey eyes engaged hers.

" I'm too late then, Bell ? "

" Yes, Peter. I'm sorry."

A deckhand, passing aft on rubber soles, created a fortunate diversion. Bell rose from her chair.

" I think I'll go to my cabin now," she said. " And Peter, please believe that I am sorry."

" I'll wait," he replied. He took her hand and raised it to his lips in a gesture learned somewhere outside Scotland. " I'll always adore those hands."

Some tacit understanding as to the proprieties took them together into the saloon, and Bell had the feeling of passing back out of illusion into the workaday world. She saw the looks of hopeful curiosity on the faces of the relatives on both sides, quickly raised from the cards before them on the table. Ambrose's dull eyes concentrated comically on her left hand.

" Always bridge," she remarked, elaborately casual. " Peter and I were at least enjoying the fresh air.

The relaxing of the tension was for her almost a physical sensation. The mood of the bridge party most obviously relapsed into the anti-climatic.

" Well," said Papa, huffily, returning to the dummy hand before him, " I must say, Charlie, that I'd have drawn out their Diamonds before getting on to your Hearts. But it's your funeral."

" I'm no' buried yet," retorted Charlie Manuel cheerfully. He drew his next lead out of dummy and slapped it on the baize. " Bate that yin if ye can, Ambrose, ma bonnie boy ! "

Before the Oliphants left the *Northern Queen* two days later Bluebell was aware of a certain unpopularity. Nothing was said, to be sure, but in the subtle, complex interplay of attitudes she perceived that she had lost her position as the life and hope of the party, as its bright focus of romantic and even commercial interest. In the unsubtle attitudes of Papa and Ambrose she discerned their resentment of her failure—she could hear their very intonations—to pull it off. The West Room would agree in full session that she had chucked away a good chance ; simply chucked it away ; and that the dam' thing about Bell was a chap never knew where he stood with her. No sense, in fact, and dam' little care for our position.

Looking back on it all five years later, Bluebell still thought kindly of Charlie Manuel, who was cheery and realistic, and of Mrs. Manuel, who was disappointed but correct. The nicest of all was Peter who, when she was all cloaked and gloved to go ashore off the *Northern Queen*, waited for her in a nook outside her cabin. She held out her hand to say good-bye.

" Only if you take off that glove," he said with his dark, friendly smile. " It was your hands that started it, remember."

" You're a dear, Peter," she murmured as he stooped to kiss her fingers once again.

It was disconcerting to realize later on that such a little grace, such a pleasant and inexpensive decoration of life, could never be expected of Jack Alston, and that she had nevertheless gone seeking the company of Jack Alston as if it were he who had a hand to be kissed. She had been for years a sort of parody of the fairy-tale princess who, for love of the charcoal-burner's son, shed her dignity of rank and her individual pride to seek out her lover in the forest. She had even been tempted like the girl in the story-book to pass her messages out of the castle by the hands of servants !

The dreadful thing was that she could not trust Papa and the Boys to respect her private correspondence. O ! they would not have dared to purloin and open a letter, but any one addressed to her that lay on the hall table would assuredly be picked up and looked at, its origin discussed. She could not go out alone, but Papa would ask where she was going or, on her return, where she had been. Her humiliation was that she had been forced to tell the servants to sort out her letters from each delivery and leave them in the old sewing-room. As for her outings, she learned to lie cheerfully.

It was not a deliberate tyranny the West Room exercised. Their watch was not upon Bluebell in particular. They were just ill-equipped men bent on safeguarding their comfort and on securing their privacy against the most casual interruptions. As the old order hurtled out of control towards the initial calamity of 1914 the eccentricities of Papa and the Boys grew more fantastic than those of the women who served them. Not a foot could crunch the gravel of the drive, whether that of the postman or the whistling boy with the basket from the butcher's, but a furtive shadow behind the curtains on the easternmost window of the West Room indicated that at least one pair of eyes was watching, reporting, commentating.

Beyond the fortress, thus, Jack Alston was unapproachable, one of the Untouchables who dwelt in that town of Garvel which, stretching far beyond the walls of Agincourt and sprawling over the steep foothills, was territory only sketchily known to the oldest Miss Oliphant. On shopping expeditions in the Napier she could pass his office and scan in vain the first-floor windows, shadowed half-way up by dark screens bearing in faded gold the legend, Watt and MacNicol, Writers and Notaries Public. At concerts and lectures, duly chaperoned in the best seats, she could look round and perhaps see his earnest, neat face among so many dull faces in the hall and even risk a smile : sometimes actually a word or two in the vestibule on the way to the

waiting car ; but such as Jack Alston, of course, was not to be expected at the Assemblies, even when Herr Iff's band was at its most sentimental and nostalgic in the waltzes from *The Count of Luxemburg* and *The Girl in the Taxi*. And when she once in a while met him face to face, in fleeting but adequate circumstances of security, she would be baffled by his merely interested courtesy, by his refusal to heed the flash of intimacy she offered him.

On that night after her father's funeral, flushed for lack of sleep and with too much thinking and worrying and remembering, Bluebell felt all her skin go hot at the memory of how, making up a lie for Papa, she went to see Jack's mother.

The decision was only one possible climax of a phase of lonely desperation. It was an act of beggary, nevertheless ; it was a crawling of a fool of a woman in love. She was not even an Oliphant then ; she was just a young woman desperately seeking peace for her mind and ease for the pain in her heart. She had told Papa that she was going collecting for the Female Benevolent near at hand and wouldn't need the car ; and God knew that she was going to solicit benevolence for one female !

She could remember every detail of her walk, down to the rusting tails of plaintain on the strips of grass beside the unformed pathway along Auld Street ; the smell on the stairs up to the second-floor flat in Chapel Street ; the vehement clangour of the bell on coiled springs agitated by her pull on a brass knob highly polished.

Jack's mother answered the ring in person, being without the services of even one maid and rather defiantly proud of the fact. Bell miserably guessed that she had been resting and was not pleased to be disturbed in mid-afternoon. Yet the white hair in its net was unruffled ; the high, old-fashioned collar, frilled with lawn and supported by strips of celluloid at the sides, was exactly in position ; the rings on her ears and fingers were as if she had just finished dressing for a party : the general effect set off by a suspicion of powder on the wrinkling cheeks and bright buckles on high-heeled shoes. The correct gentility of Captain Alston's widow in the doorway of her flat in a near-working-class district seemed formidable to the girl from the big house in the West End.

" Good afternoon, Miss Oliphant. Perhaps you will step in ? "

" Thank you, Mrs. Alston. I thought I might call."

Bluebell was completely conscious of the weakness of her position as against the clear, cool hostility of Jack Alston's mother. There was no doubt as to which of the two women commanded the situation.

" Perhaps you will sit down here," said the old lady, leading her guest into the sitting-room and indicating an easy chair facing the light.

She sat down with a rustle of silken petticoat in another, so placed back-to-window that Bluebell could make little of her hostess's expression apart from the play of firelight on her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Don't you find it cold for the time of year?"

"Yes. October's often quite a nice month in Scotland, but it has been terribly wet this year. That's a lovely fire you have, Mrs. Alston."

"I take some trouble with my fires," said Captain Alston's widow primly. "I lived a good many years in the East while my dear husband was alive, and I find this damp climate very trying."

"I'm sure you do."

It went on like that—every exchange absolutely correct in form and utterly empty of any content save the hostility of two decent women contending for the devotion of one man, who happened at that moment, tired and anxious, to be winding up the case for the respondents in a tedious Workman's Compensation case before the Sheriff in the Courthouse only some three hundred yards along the street round the corner. Mrs. Alston finally proposed that they might have a cup of tea.

"That would be delightful," Bluebell agreed. "Do let me help you."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Mrs. Alston.

So the girl was left to look round the room which contained all the conventional proofs of the fact that the late Captain Alston had been for many years the faithful servant of Fairbairn's Strath Line—the ugly, stuffed carcase of a tropical fish in a glass case, ginger jars from China, a bit of fancy carving in odorous sandalwood, an obvious trophy from Antwerp or Ostend in the form of the model of a Flemish fishing-boat and, above the fireplace, a stiff rendering in oils of a ship with one streaming black funnel and three schooner masts apparently racing at headlong speed through a spirited sea, which was still as orderly in its wave-formation as the white hair on the head of its late master's widow.

When this lady brought in the tea-things on a great lacquered tray Bluebell exclaimed at the fragility of the china and the solidity of the silverware.

"Everything is Japanese," explained Jack's mother with the proud precision of a schoolmistress. "My late husband, Captain Alston, was very tasteful in all his buyings. This tea-set came from Osaka; every single piece packed in bran in its own cardboard box. The silver—see how heavy and soft it is!—was presented to my late husband by the directors of Butterfield, Swire. You have heard of them, of course. That was when, in the *Strathdevon*—no, the *Strathbraan*—he rescued the crew of one of their coasting ships from Chinese

pirates in Hope Bay : near Swatow, you know. The strange thing is that he got the set sent home to me exactly in time, *exactly*, to be my gift on Jack's birth. Our only child. He was born in Glasgow. of course. I went into a nursing home. My husband, Captain Alston, insisted."

"That was marvellous ! " cried Bluebell.

And this was the moment. Her hostess and adversary had admitted the existence of Jack as a figure on the stage they shared.

"I never seem to see Jack at all nowadays," said Bluebell.

"He is always very busy, to be sure," returned Jack's mother carefully.

"Yes, but we were so much together in the old soup kitchen days. Now I see him occasionally at a lecture or a concert, but he seems to disappear before I can have a word with him. And we used to have lots of interesting talks."

Bell spoke candidly and sincerely : insincerely only in so far as her private self was peering through the twilight for the wraith of a lost lover. She did not seek to flatter and placate the mother of Jack. It was only after her honest outburst that the reserve of the older woman made her feel that she was stripping herself, pleading all too obviously for a kindly glance from the other female's son.

The autumn evening darkened quickly. Banks of cloud above the cemetery on the hill obscured what should have been a fiery winter sunset. Within the little sitting-room of the tenement flat the brown-papered walls began to take the glow of the fire. Jack's mother was an enigmatic, upright figure against the windows and behind the reflection of the flames on the lenses of her spectacles.

"I hardly think that that could be called Jack's fault," she said, and there was an edge on her voice.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Alston ? "

"You make it very difficult for me, Miss Oliphant," the dry voice rapped back. "But if your people speak to my son's senior partner, who is really his employer ; and if Jack is told that his attentions to you will be resented, and that his partnership will actually be in danger . . . Well, I can hardly see why you should be surprised that you don't see much of him. We are not rich people, by any means, but we have some pride."

"It's all a lie ! It's a crime ! It's—it's perfectly damnable ! "

Bluebell shouted her protest ; and then she was on her feet, her forehead against Mrs. Alston's mantelpiece, sobbing bitterly.

"The humiliation of it ! " she wept desperately. "The insult to you, Mrs. Alston—to Jack ! And to poor me, if it comes to that ! I didn't know. I wondered. I am sorry."

"I am sorry too, Miss Oliphant, but there it is."

Jack's mother was just, but she was not ready to be kind. She pushed back her chair and rose. Her movement was towards the door.

"I don't think I need put on the light. If you would like to go to the bathroom, Miss Oliphant! . . . It is very awkward and difficult for us all."

"No. Yes," said Bluebell.

She felt empty, as if all her interest in and zest for living had been sucked out of her by a mechanical process.

"You understand, don't you, Mrs. Alston, that I am as shocked now as you must have been? If you could only make it clear to Jack . . ."

"I don't feel that I can raise the subject with my son. I can't tell you what his feelings are, if any. It is some time now, more than a year, since we received the insult."

Up the dull street of tenement houses, past the Co-op shop, past the rows of tiny semi-detached villas on the upper part of Chapel Street, down into Auld Street by the golf course corner, and the afterglow of the sunset in a western sky now clear again throwing up in gloomy silhouette the memorial stones in the cemetery—Bluebell could remember five years later every step of that journey through unhappiness and feel the ache of the sobbing she allowed to overwhelm her again as she passed along the West End streets in their winter evening loneliness.

She reflected afterwards, as an odd circumstance, that her interview with Jack's mother had not left her angry with Papa and the Boys. It had got beyond that now. There was only the sheer sadness of life in general and of having to live at all.

7

Somewhere in her reading Bluebell had come across a phrase that haunted her. She always meant to check the reference and never did, but it stuck in her mind that the words were those of one of the great geologists, Murchison or Geikie, who, surveying the work of a lifetime, concluded: "We find no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end."

Somehow the saying satisfied her, summarizing her own feeling for the endless flow of human living, that queer process which the more it changed, the more it was the same thing. Crises and climaxes were never final. Happiness and unhappiness were never for her decisive states. Her world was seemingly in ruins that evening as she walked home from Chapel Street, sobbing, and less than a year later

she was, for a space, being continually happy in the frequent and intimate company of Jack Alston.

That—she could admit to herself as she wakened out of a brief and troubled sleep on the morning of Friday, March 20, 1918—that was indeed the outcome of a crisis of inescapable magnitude. When the long peace was broken by the German march into Belgium under the hot sun of August, 1914, when the fat British planet started to reel on a downward course, sane people knew in their bones that an epoch was at its end, and that even so early in the reign of George the Fifth, by the grace of God, the ancient monarchy was no longer remote in unchallenged success and placid self-satisfaction.

Some folk, to be sure, and Papa was one of them, either could not or stubbornly refused to face the historical imperative. All the might of Germany in arms merely evoked from Papa some of the most comic simplifications Bluebell could remember hearing him utter. He had the whole complex of international rivalries and greeds in a firm grasp.

"Germany!" he would cry rhetorically. "She can't last three months. Why? I'll tell you why. The port of Hamburg—just that. If you had ever seen the port of Hamburg you'd realize that no country could live with so much shipping and trade at a standstill. Well, hasn't the British Navy got Hamburg completely bottled up? You mark my words, Germany hasn't a hope. Three months at the most."

The disasters at Mons and Le Cateau left Papa's confidence unimpaired.

"What about it, then?" he challenged pessimism. "A couple of skirmishes that go against us, and everybody is running round, shouting for help. You'd think we hadn't a navy. Leave it to the Royal Navy, say I. Leave it to K. of K. and old Joffer. I'll bet they've got something up their sleeve. Those Uhlan chaps'll be dam' sorry they spoke. When I was in South Africa . . ."

The riposte on the Marne only confirmed Papa in his opinion of himself as a military expert, and when his three months passed into four, five and then six and the miseries of blockade warfare on the sodden West Front, he was ready with the explanation of Germany's refusal to collapse for the obvious commercial reasons. It was those damned neutrals. Papa supposed the Dutch were giving their pals, the Huns, the free use of Rotterdam, though how the blockade could fail to check this traffic he did not pause to explain. Papa wouldn't trust the Dutch the length of his foot. He remembered once, in Cape Town, during the South African War . . .

At the same time, Bluebell could see signs of concern behind the bright façade presented to a warring world by her menfolk in the

West Room. The Boys would discuss, however, academically, the ways in which a chap might most romantically associate himself with one of the Services. Ambrose, approved by Papa, thought there was a lot to be said for a commission in the Cavalry, whatever ignorant people blethered about this being a Gunner's war. Young Tristram asserted that it was the Navy for him or nothing. Rupert, being the feckless one, made no rash pretensions to military glory, and Bell liked him for that, seeing her other brothers' lack of haste to decide in which way best to serve the King and Country they talked a good deal about in a war that, according to Papa, must be short, sharp and victorious.

Bluebell watched with amusement and humiliation contending in her mind, and it was during these months that she finally admitted to herself the plain, sickening fact that Papa and the Boys were cowards. She saw four men, desperately clinging to their security and comfort and ever tending to draw these amenities more and more snugly about their persons. Papa's most decisive act was to cable Jerome money and a bidding to come home; and Jerome duly appeared before Christmas: lean and burnt after his years under Australian sun, abrupt, apparently decisive. He brought to the lore of the West Room his meed of manly reminiscence: "When I was in Australia," or "I remember once—it was up in the backblocks of Queensland . . ."

Perhaps quite unconsciously they entrenched themselves, Papa and the Boys. There was little to disturb them beyond the prompting of such conscience as they may have possessed, and Bluebell could discern few traces of any censor at work in the immortal souls of her brothers. There was one dreadful, tempestuous day of January when the morning post brought four plain envelopes, each addressed in typewritten characters to the four Oliphant boys, each containing a single white feather. They were noisily and righteously indignant over this gross offence to decent pride.

"Some confounded madwoman of a disappointed old spinster!" Ambrose summed it up. "If I could only spot who it is—and I've a pretty shrewd suspicion, I don't mind saying—there would be a very pretty court case, I promise you. I suppose the fool doesn't realize that I'm a busy man these days."

Ambrose had somehow acquired the information that there was going to be a lot of big money in whisky, and through some mysterious connections he had already set up as a buyer of that commodity. A small office in the city was regarded as necessary for the conduct of this trade, and Ambrose was travelling regularly again; it was solemnly discussed among Papa and the Boys that Jerome would go into partnership with him. They talked much of single whiskies and blends, of grain and malt, of proof and bond and evaporation, and

grave were the evenings in the West Room when Ambrose would come home with a sample of his latest offer or purchase.

"Very palatable," Papa would say judiciously, rolling a sip around his tongue, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. "Mature."

"Not just a trifle smoky?" Jerome would demur.

"I don't think so, Jerry," Ambrose would intervene. "Those West Highland whiskies are all malty, but when you consider Talisker, for instance . . ."

"Ah, Talisker!"

From the outside the walls of their citadel Bluebell watched her father and her brothers erect their elaborate defences against the horror of the war that, in truth, frightened them greatly. That city office, with its suggestion of a large and constructive busy-ness, was a strongpoint of the defensive mechanism. When the Admiralty commandeered the *Iolanthe* and towed her away to be converted and armed as a patrol vessel the satisfaction was unbounded.

"What did I tell you?" asked Papa. "You've got to depend on the Royal Navy in the long run, and you may take it from me that the Admiralty knows a good ship when it sees one. And I don't mind telling you that, for all the charter-money I'll get back, we're making a pretty big sacrifice."

Bluebell, at nearly thirty, could reflect with profound bitterness on the failure of her menfolk during those years of crisis, but she had to be honest with herself and admit that she had been too deep in her own concerns at the time to care much about the self-protective antics of Papa and the Boys. She was seeing Jack Alston regularly, walking with him, talking at length. His grave, gentle company provided her with a world which made that of Agincourt unreal.

Three nights a week at least they worked together in the Y.M.C.A. hut in the great camp that had sprung up, a mushroom townlet, by the shores of the Firth near The Battery. Bluebell had been careful to ask Papa if she might volunteer, and he had magnificently agreed.

"Certainly, my dear girl. We've all got to put our backs into this business. You go ahead. Bridget can carry on when you are not here."

It was freedom regained. Her love was near at hand again to be watched at his work—slight, pale, spectacled, but infallibly competent to sort out a problem of catering, to still the tantrums of a lady helper outraged by some triviality of precedence or privilege, calm and firm before the truculence of a half-drunk reservist out of the Glasgow slums. Every evening he saw her home, and they walked slowly by the quiet streets, even once or twice, on starry nights or when the moon was high, right round the winding road over the Craigs; and they talked and talked. She had the warm feeling of their intimacy and confidence growing as the weeks passed. She ex-

pected no stormy declaration of passion from this quiet friend of hers. It was a little triumph, over which she could smile to herself, when she got him over his awkwardness in calling her by her Christian name.

One evening—it was in January, 1915—he asked her if she would go walking with him on the following afternoon, and Bluebell spent a restless night, now ecstatically happy and then cold with fear, wondering what the departure from custom might portend. Nothing in two young people taking a walk together on a Saturday afternoon, but she was exquisitely sensitive to the subtleties of Jack's moods, and she went to the rendezvous with a heart that pounded.

They passed by the hilly Peat Road and through the untidy upper edges of the town and turned along the track that wound by the High Aqueduct, westwards. They were now high above the huddle of Garvel in its smoky hollows. Its noises rose only faintly to their ears, so that the hoots of a shunting engine by the docks sounded as if they came from another province miles away. Two or three earnest pedestrians passed the time of day with them, like adventurers surprisingly encountered in a strange country. Blackfaced ewes raised their handsome heads on the moorland side of the stream to watch them pass.

"It's an odd thought," said Jack suddenly, "that you and I should be walking by the Aqueduct to-day. The whole idea of it, and a brilliant one in its time, was your great-grandfather's, old Julius Oliphant; the work was put in hand by his cousin Mark, who stole most of the credit for it, by the way, and a lot of the profit. My maternal grandfather was a young clerk of works on the job. Queer."

He spoke with that feeling for history that comes on many men in moments of decision, and Bluebell felt the wave of unhappiness come at her. About two miles along from the Water House he suggested they should rest on the parapet of one of the little sheep-bridges that spanned at intervals the swift, deep, brown stream.

"I thought," he said at once, "we'd better get up here for a quiet talk. There's something I must tell you."

"O!"

"I've thought it all out, Bell, and I have decided that I must go and join up."

"You, Jack? Your age, your eyesight . . . There are so many more who should be going before you."

She was pleading with him, and her head, covered only by a small black velvet tammy, was close to his, but his gaze remained fixed gravely in front of him.

"I can at least do some clerking to relieve a fitter man. I can carry a stretcher. It doesn't matter, Bell, that quite a lot of younger

fellows ought to be off before me. The poor beggars may simply lack imagination. They'll be conscripted sooner or later, in any case. I only know—I *know*—that the country's going to have a very tough struggle to get through, and that a man's job is to go now. The sooner, the better."

"I see," said Bluebell in a whisper.

She saw clearly, and she hated the logic. She felt utterly lost in a greyness of desolation. Now she realized that this day of bleak and formal decision was as dreary as it could be. A thin drizzle from the East had started to drift on to their faces, and a haze, as dark and lifeless as industrial smoke, had come upon them to take every vestige of shape and colour out of mountain and sea.

"Can't we get married and be done with it?" she suddenly cried, desperate. "O, Jack!"

Her head fell on his shoulder, but no touch of his lips on her hair, no clasp of his arm round her shoulder, comforted her. His quiet, all-too-reasonable voice persisted, though sadly enough.

"I thought of that, Bell," he said, "but it's no use. Too many complications, especially for you, if anything——"

"Were to happen," she added miserably and almost angrily indeed. "As if I couldn't take my own responsibilities!"

"No, no! It's not that," he tried to soothe her. "I am being as dull and disappointing as you please, but this is sense, Bell. Too many complications at this late hour. Far too much unhappiness for you, in fact. I would as soon . . . Never mind. But when I come back, Bell; when I come back, my dearest, sweetest dear——"

Then, at last, his arms were about her and his kisses were strong on her lips. Years of ache and frustration, of humiliation and loneliness, ended in this ecstasy. Her man was hers. The confession of love was the wiping out of the past, the illumination of a future.

For Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant on the night after her father's funeral, however, the memory of that moment was as bitter as it was sadly sweet. She had been able to forget the world for perhaps ten minutes in her lover's embrace before a hearty party of ramblers in tweeds and thick stockings came shouting round a bend in the track behind them and they realized that the easterly drizzle had turned to a chill and driving rain. The physical act of disengaging hastily from the embrace was a humiliation, small but memorable in retrospect.

That was all she ever had of him as a lover. Within a day or two he was gone. They turned out their soldiers quickly in those days. He was whipped from the recruiting office to the training centre, and she had his letters week by week, but even when the time came for the 9th Division of Kitchener's Army to embark, he did not come

home on leave. His mother chose to travel South and pass those last few days with her son in London, and for all the length and passion of his letter of farewell, what was there for Bluebell, the young woman without status, to say or think or do?

His last letter came from France. Then there was a silence. Then by the post one morning came the note from Mrs. Alston: a note correct and prim even in grief from a woman who insisted on possessing her own to the end. She was sure that dear Miss Oliphant would be sorry to hear that her devoted son Jack had been posted Missing in the attack on Loos and would no doubt share something of a mother's anxiety in the absence of any word beyond the War Office telegram.

The letter came from Liverpool, and Jack's mother said that she could not, for reasons Miss Oliphant would understand, bear the thought of seeing the flat in Chapel Street again, and that she had arranged to live with her brother's widow in the English city. She ended by trusting that one of Jack's friends in his last days would enjoy a life less tragic that she, Jack's mother, had been called upon to bear.

8

A hot bath helped to ease the aches of a body that had tossed and turned most of the night through. Bridget brought her tea. But there was no bracing of the weary mind, no soothing the turmoil of memories and reflections that made it like a boiling pot, no stopping the flow of statements, now angry and abusive, then dignified and ironic, her imagination kept producing to confound the Boys.

Bridget lingered in the room, making a show of tidying up the tangled bedclothes.

"You've had a night of it," she said at length, morosely for a woman whose whole stock-in-trade was a cheerful realism.

"I have had a lot of nights of it, Bridgie," replied Bluebell, pressing the strong, comforting bristles of hairbrush into her scalp. "That's what kept me awake—thinking of so many nights. And it wasn't the worst, really. There was once, long ago, when I nearly committed suicide."

"For God's sake, lassie!"

"It sounds silly now, doesn't it? But one night on the Esplanade three years ago . . . I was walking home alone from the canteen, and the tide was high. The waves were running along the sea wall about a yard below my feet. And I nearly—terribly nearly, Bridgie—tipped myself over. I *wanted* to drown myself. And do you know what kept me back?"

"You've more sense," said Bridget stoutly.

"No, not that. Just because I've got more pride, more vanity. Even with my heart broken, I thought I'd just be showing off. It's awful never to be able to be tragic, always to be seeing both sides of things, as if everything were really ridiculous . . . Chuck me a pair of stockings out of that top left-hand drawer."

Bridget punched the pillows on the bed and shook them angrily into place.

"There's not much use talking like that now. After what you were saying last night."

"Isn't it?" retorted Bluebell sharply. "It's been the whole trouble for years and years. I can't make up my mind even now. Isn't it really the terrible thing that I leave everything until it's too late?"

Bridget was now ostentatiously busy among Bluebell's clothes on their hangers in the wardrobe.

"I don't know anything about that," she said, apparently addressing herself to the lifeless garments. Then she spoke over her shoulder. "But if you're leaving, I'm leaving too. So's Hannah."

"You would go with me, Bridgie?"

Bluebell turned a glowing face on the older woman, but it was only to see the door burst open and, running in at full gallop, the figure of her half-sister Chris: an enchanting little figure with her hair in pigtails, in a quilted blue dressing-gown over her nightie and red slippers. The child was a projectile of happy vitality that threw itself at Bluebell and hugged her, the feel of the thin, tense arms round her neck unbearably sweet. Then the infant must jump into Bluebell's bed and, pulling the clothes back over her small person, enjoy that sensation of being at once grown-up, confortable and conspicuous which so greatly pleases the infant female.

"You're a rogue!" cried Bluebell, spoiling her.

"And into the bed I've just been redding up!" added Bridget with mock severity. She advanced on the child, who giggled. "I'll shoot the boots of you. I'll smack a bad lass who hasn't done her hair or brushed her teeth. I'll . . ."

There was a shriek of delight from the child as Bridget's great arms descended upon her person, only to tickle her lightly, as by almost immemorial custom, under the arms. That part of the ritual over, Chris went suddenly rigid, her eyes closed, and her small hands were held upright, palms together over her flat breast.

"Now I'm Mary, Queen of Scots," she announced in a voice of make-believe sonority. "I'm dead."

The creature had indeed so composed herself as to form an uncanny replica in minature of the effigy of a great lady, such as she might

have seen in a picture-book ; and on this special morning of a familiar performance Bluebell saw the person and significance of the infant actress through a brooding eye and realized that she cared profoundly for this happy child of the unhappy Harriet Macdonald. She saw her half-sister as the eternally hopeful Primavera as against her own status of—what ? . . . well, say, a fitfully promising gleam of sunlight on an afternoon of a wet August. She loved this little, free thing even for the hair that was darker than that of any other child of Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant. Chris was one of the few compensations.

Across the bed Bluebell caught Bridget's look, intense through the steel-rimmed spectacles, and the silent signal was a recognition of their joint responsibility for the happiness of at least one of the Oliphant girls.

Meanwhile, the affairs of the household had to be seen to. Even on this morning, while she felt light-headed on the very edge of decision, the complex set of domestic machinery within the walls of the villa called Agincourt must be kept moving as it had moved for more than thirty years, and by sheer force of habit Bluebell started to worry over detail. Papa's illness and death had put everything behind. She and Bridget would have to go through his wardrobe, cleaning up and sorting out, and that would take all afternoon at least. It must be a fortnight since Cook had reported the coal running short ; remember to ring up Simpson's. The tradesmen's books—Heavens ! they were a fortnight overdue, and it had been one of Papa's fiercest rules in protection of his pride that no tradesman, save a tailor, should be kept waiting a day for his money by any Oliphant.

Bluebell started with the books in the little sewing-room—the grocer's, the butcher's, the baker's, the fishmonger's, the milkman's Five and three and two and three . . . The Oliphants never counted the odd shillings and pence but always took the pound above the net figure. (Remember the servants' wages next week.) Twenty would do, but make it twenty-five for safety . . . Bluebell thought of how for week after week, for years on end, she had gone to Papa with her rough note of her needs in cash and had been handed in return a bearer cheque on the British Linen Bank. At least, he had never niggled about cash for running expenses. But to whom did she go now ? To Ambrose, of all people ?

Ambrose would fuss over the details, showing his importance. Jerome would snatch the slip from him in his rude, neurotic way and start to pick holes in a tally that was a trifle as against the wine and tobacco bills of the West Room. And how could that be borne ?

She was considering this in detachment, as a problem affecting another female she had once known rather well, when a knock at the door heralded the entrance of Hannah, now a tall, worried-looking,

middle-ageing woman with enormous red hands ; an almost military figure in her lilac morning wrapper.

" If you please, ma'am, I want to give notice," she said.

" Why on earth, Hannah ? " cried Bluebell. She added on a laugh of almost hysterical cynicism : " What a lovely morning this is turning out to be ! "

" It's Mr. Jerome again, Ma'am. I can't stand the way he talks to us girls, and I won't."

" What was the special trouble ? "

" That's just it, Miss Bell ! " said Hannah earnestly, dropping the formality of an upper house-tablemaid of twenty years standing. " It was nothing really. He was just in one of those quick moods of his. He swore I'd given him margarine for his breakfast, and I told him it was the best butter you'd get these days, and he said he supposed everybody was getting butter but himself, and I said that you kept none for yourself, and he said ' O, you shut your mouth and get me *butter* ! ' Just like that—*butter*. I'm sorry for you, Miss Bell, but I'm not going to be spoken to like that."

" No," Bluebell agreed drearily. " I suppose you are quite right, Hannah. I'm sorry. But we'll all have a month to think over it."

" Yes, Miss Bell. Thank you. If it was just yourself . . . I'll away and get on with my work."

Bell rose from the table and walked to the window of the sewing-room. It commanded no more than a view of what had been the tiled stableyard and the kitchen garden, with a privet hedge running uphill between them. If it had been a window opening above the waters of an icy Alpine lake still and blue in morning sunlight she would have been no more concerned with the scene. Her eyes were sightless ; all her faculties were turned inwards. She had in that moment only the queer little flash of detached observation which showed her to herself as something like one who, partially anæsthetized, is wheeled along on a soundless trolley towards the operating table and the surgeon's knife, with its powers of life or death.

This was it. This was the absolutely last moment of that decision which had been dangling itself before her for so many years. While her eyes saw the resident robin of the kitchen garden chase a couple of sparrows out of his private estate across the newly-delved lumps of last year's cabbage patch, she realized that the decision had in fact been made. She was actually the survivor of the surgical operation, waiting now in semi-consciousness for the lips of the wound to be sewn together.

There was no hope of any compromise as between herself and the Boys in the West Room. They were cads and cowards. There were better things to do than stay and minister to such as Jerome ; there

were the proper destinies of such as the infant who had jumped into her bed that morning to be fulfilled. It was all perfectly clear, as Bell always wanted things to be clear.

Still, in the last hours of the family, as it had been founded by Papa and Mama, she was not free from the concern long habit had imposed on her. She had no feeling of being a brittle, decisive Nora Helmer ; she kept worrying over the rearrangement of the domestic economy of Agincourt. There would have to be a great interviewing of candidates for the post of housekeeper to the Boys, and only the right woman would get the job if she, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, had anything to do with it. Then there was how to get Rose Anne placed so that her talents might be properly developed ; how to get Chris educated precisely as she, Bluebell, had long ago decided coolly how a female should be educated. How many of the servants would be willing to stay on in Agincourt under a new housekeeper ? Then the new housekeeper would have to be tutored in the little ways and fads the Boys had developed in the past few years.

Ambrose must have fish as the main course of at least one meal a day, but while he liked a steak as often as he could get it (and he could be eloquent on precisely the ideal degree of cooking a steak should have) Rupert suffered from his teeth and would demand mince when Hannah went to the West Room in the morning for orders. Jerome had his own gastric theories and would not eat potatoes unless they were creamed, as distinct from Ambrose, who could almost live on chips. One must have morning rolls for breakfast, another couldn't bear the sight of them and must have oatcakes of a special brand (and there would be one hell of a row for Hannah if he didn't get the branded tin on the table before him) while the other wanted toast. And—O ! of course—Jerome had to have a glass of hot water on his morning tea-tray.

The complications of this sort were endless. No woman who hadn't lived with the Boys for years could ever master the chart of their vehement idiosyncracies. Bell let out a hollow little yelp of laughter to think of the sheer impossibility of making out on paper a plan to guide her successor. Her brothers, with herself as the dumb witness and servant of the process, had wound themselves and the household beyond disentanglement now in a cocoon of hopeless intricacy. The last of the Oliphant men were lost in a jungle of triviality and self-indulgence but yet beanfeasting behind the reduced but yet sufficient stockade of the American fortune.

Bitterness and contempt, the accumulated bile of the years, overwhelmed Bluebell as she watched the robin, now triumphant over the interloping sparrows, perch on the privet hedge, always greedy and hopeful and full of ingratiating song. It was sickening to realize that

all the dietary fads of the Boys were part-and-parcel of their elaborate defences against military service. Doctors had been called in, specialists brought down from Glasgow, to certify the unique unfitness of the men of Agincourt for the rough-and-tumble of life in the Services; and the specialists had not failed to make minor hypochondriacs of their patients.

They had ultimately been forced to put up young Tristram as the family's burnt offering. That was in late 1916, when a dawning sense of deadlock in warfare and of the bitterness of local feeling had belatedly permeated the West Room. It then appeared that young Tristram had been straining at the leash ever since August, 1914; and Papa was able, as he phrased it, to pull a few strings in London.

"My youngest boy, Tristram," Bluebell could hear him say. "In the Navy now, you know. Well, actually sub-lieutenant, R.N.V.R. No, no! Not the Naval Division. That's just an infantry show now. The pukka Navy afloat. I don't mind telling you that young Tristram has pulled down what's practically a Staff job. Not bad, though I say it myself, eh?"

Tristram had now in fact a stool in the department of the officer commanding the boom defences of Scapa Flow. Jack Alston was dead in the Low Countries long ago. Jerome quarrelled with a housemaid over the contents of his butter-dish.

As if she were wrenching herself free from the creeping tentacles of lunacy in the life about her, Bluebell turned from the window and the robin and the kitchen garden to the fireplace of the old sewing-room and pressed the button of the bell.

"O, Hannah!" she said when that morose and orderly woman responded to the summons. "Would you tell Mr. Ambrose that I'll be obliged if he could meet me in the Library at eleven o'clock?"

CHAPTER VIII

REGIMENT OF WOMEN

I

BLUEBELL smiled as from the drawing-room window of her flat she watched Chris, in charge of Hannah, come through the gates of the Gardens, pause on the kerb to look out for city traffic in all its unfamiliar vagaries, then run across the broad road: two simple creatures delighted to complete the last lap of their still exciting journey in the pearly light of the October afternoon.

The child cut an adorably comic figure in the new school uniform of which she was so proud. The small face was lost under the great pancake of blue velours, bound with the green ribbon and white badge of the Gardens Private School for young ladies. Her blue napp coat (Bluebell admitted to herself) had been chosen so as to allow for growth, and the black socks and black shoes fluttering beneath its hem appeared to be supporting an inordinate spread of garment for such a tiny figure. This schoolgirl in miniature seemed all the more a laughable object beside the tall, gaunt figure of Hannah, whose daily duty and pleasure it was to fetch Chris home from school, and for the empty and purely emblematic schoolbag in brown leather she carried strapped to her shoulders.

Bluebell turned from the window and crossed the hall to the kitchen where Bridget dozed comfortably in a basket chair.

"That's Hannah and Chris coming up the stairs," she said.

"I'll take the chill off a glass of milk," responded Bridget promptly. "The bairn will be starving."

"That's almost an article of faith with you, Bridgie," observed Bluebell, smiling. "I doubt if you'd even starve a fever."

But Bridget was on the move and had no retort to make. The kitchen stirred into life again with the opening of cupboards, the clink of a saucepan, the plop of gas; the ritual of the day was resumed after the afternoon hush. The growing child came tumbling in to be embraced and to give a breathless, high-speed account of the day's wonderful doings at school. Then Hannah, the glass of milk and a plate of biscuits in her hands, a deplorable hat crowning her gaunt figure, called on Chris to come upstairs to the nursery and get her things off.

Bluebell lingered in the kitchen, surveying with a little frown its fresh decorations and new fittings. Bridget, now cook-housekeeper as

against Hannah's new lot as nurse-housemaid, opened the window and from a meat-safe bracketed to the outer wall withdrew the stump-end of a ham and regarded it critically.

"Terrible stuff they give you nowadays!" she said. "I think I'll cut this thick and slow-bake a slice or two for your dinner. It might be real nice with a wee drop apple sauce."

"That would be lovely," remarked Bluebell absently. She added vehemently: "That meat-safe is an abortion. I must get you one of the new electric refrigerators. They look lovely in the American magazines."

"The old outside larder'll do me fine," laughed Bridget. "As long as I have that patent stove and hot water when I want it . . ."

"It's doing well?"

"A treat, Bell, now I've got the knack of it! You miss the open fire, mind you, but when I think of that brute of an antiquated range in the old house down-by—a big, dirty, wasteful glutton of good coal!"

"There's nothing you can tell me about that. I had the accounts to pay," observed Bluebell sourly. "Waste! I blush when I think of it. Not just waste of fuel. Waste of labour, waste of food—and nobody caring!"

"Ah, well! That's all by with now," said Bridget tolerantly. "This is my idea of a right kitchen."

Yes, admitted Bell to herself, looking round again; she had made a fair job of what had been a Victorian kitchen as abysmally inefficient as that in Agincourt. In the alcove from which the old steel-fronted range had been gutted stood a taut, gleaming little stove-boiler that, by virtue of the miracle of slow-combustion, answered the housekeeping woman's prayer for boiling water at any hour of day or night. She considered the gas-stove provided by the Corporation on hire-purchase terms and remembered how she had toyed with the notion of cooking by electricity and had not been satisfied (by another of the Corporation's most persuasive departmental experts) that electrical heat could be controlled with sufficient precision for the subtle processes of cooking. With another secret smile she recalled how her demand for emerald green woodwork against walls washed in primrose had to be carried through by shock tactics against the disapproval, amounting at moments to indignation, of an elderly Scots decorator in the traditional school.

"It's bright," added Bridget.

"Yes, but I still think we ought to get a refrigerator. However, I'll run up and see how Chris and Hannah are getting on. Rosie should be home any time now. We'll have tea in the drawing-room. Then—O, yes! Bridgie—I'll probably go out for an hour or so. But dinner as usual at half-past six."

"It'll be all waiting for you," said Bridget indulgently. "You needna' worry. You worry too much, Bell. You're doing fine."

Bluebell could have confessed that her climb upstairs had little enough to do with Chris and Hannah. It was really that the home she had created for herself, her sisters and her servants remained a surprising and adorable novelty. The house agent had mentioned this top flat and attics, ten rooms for £75 a year, as a mere side-issue of her inquiry, not to be taken seriously by a lady of taste and still more obvious means. But Bluebell had been entranced by the size and height of the great Victorian rooms with their view through plate-glass across the Gardens and by the charming possibilities of the camceiled attics. The arrangement challenged her sense of order; she thought with positive pleasure of matching her feeling for style, and Rose Anne's impeccable feeling for colour, against schemes of decoration—largely in brown woodwork and angry red wallpapers—that clearly dated from 1906 or thereabouts.

She ranged the top landing with pleasure. On a grey rug before a gas-fire in the day nursery, bright with woodwork in apple green and walls washed primrose, Chris lay on her stomach above a picture-book while Hannah darned in an easy chair. Bluebell popped her head into the little night nursery next door to look again at the suite in white enamel and the jolly cartoons with which Rose Anne had decorated the walls. The big skylit bathroom; a bedroom each for Bridget and Hannah; and then the little chintzy sitting-room she had provided for these two faithful friends.

That was one of the best of her satisfactions, the maids' sitting-room, and it was not by any means wholly sentimental. It was an article of her domestic faith, a bit of considered economy, that good service merits and responds to good conditions. When Bluebell thought of the servants' quarters in her father's house in Garvel and over at Inverquey . . .

There it was, of course. All her acts in the refurnishing of Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, had been in reaction to the atmosphere of Agincourt as much as an expression of the housekeeping lessons she had painfully learned there. It was her declaration of independence; the bright paints and fabrics of the new home made up the signal in bright bunting that proclaimed the accomplished fact of emancipation. If the Boys could have their frowsty, brown, leathery West Room, then it was delightfully malicious fun to give Rose Anne a free hand to transform the great Victorian drawing-room downstairs into a lounge as comfortable and colourful as pleased a nineteen-year-old girl who was wholly a woman and inexorably an artist.

Bluebell heard the tea-things clinking into the lounge and went down to find that her half-sister had returned from her day at the

School of Art. Rose Anne lay in one of her daft postures, stretched flat out on a divan in the bay of the window. She had not taken off her coat; her hat and a satchel had been dropped anyhow on the floor. Bluebell deliberately ignored the little element of deliberation in the pose.

"Was your day very exhausting, Rosie?" she asked just a little tartly.

"Exhausting?" cried the fair young girl. "Appalling! Devastating! My dear, in the life class to-day I beheld for the first time the male form divine. In the nearly nude. My brain reels. My heart goes pit-a-pat. I had to lie down."

Bluebell laughed tolerantly at the undergraduettish set-piece, probably rehearsed.

"Up to your old games? Trying to shock me. Come and have a cup of tea. It will cool your blood."

"But it's I who am shocked," protested Rose Anne, rising from the divan with a great display of long leg. "The Greek sculptors never prepared me for the moment when that giant of a man walked in."

"There are *three* toasted scones with butter," said Bluebell. "I am nearly through the first."

Rose Anne threw off her coat; and as she passed between her and the fire Bluebell had a dramatically lighted glimpse of this young girl who was now in her care: at her age and with her given temperament a more onerous charge by far than the child upstairs. Chris was clean malleable stuff to be shaped, but the Oliphant strain had somehow produced, and already formed to some extent, this genetic sport in the female line—tallish, slender, frail, fair, fluttering . . .

You could never get the word for Rose Anne. Bluebell had once heard somebody describe her as "a dizzy duck," and it had seemed good at the time, but it was really only good of one aspect of the girl. She could be feather-headed in one moment and as sharply realistic in the next. She seemed to dream tolerantly like a spoiled and sated princess in a fairy tale; and then, when you touched on what she knew and cared about, she could lash out like a panther.

"How's the Tuckshop?" asked Rose Anne, drooping cross-legged like a ballerina on to the hearthrug, her cup of tea in one hand and a muffin in the other.

"All right, so far," said Bell. "The decorators got properly started yesterday, and a lot of the curtains and hangings came to-day. I'm going along there now."

"I rather think I'll go with you. I don't trust commercial decorators or war-time dyes in fabrics or anything else."

"But you'll only see them in great empty rooms in cold electric light."

"Poor Bell!" murmured Rose Anne, tapping the side of her head. "Has it never occurred to you that, in this climate, your customers will almost always be eating their sandwiches and drinking their nice, hot cups of tea in artificial light? Don't you realize that all my beautiful colour-schemes were worked out in terms of that light. Ah, me! The old story. Commerce and Art."

The sisters, fur-coated against the chill of the early winter evening, took a tram into the city. Driven by a spirited young woman in green trousers, it carried them along the tree-lined boulevards of the inner suburbs and through the whirlpool at the Cross to a wide street of rich shops, ranging from the saucy little booths of milliners with elegant Christian names—Christine, Paulette or Marja—to the majestic premises of departmental stores. It stopped to drop them opposite a corner block, of which the ground floor was occupied by a firm of furriers with a frankly Jewish name. Along sixty yards of the first floor above small lances of light scintillated through chinks in heavy but untidy curtains within the windows.

They had to stand on the kerb until the peak-hour flow of trams, uphill and downhill, broke to let them cross.

"It's enchanting!" Rose Anne cried suddenly. "Any city in the dusk is lovely. Bustle, movement, colour, vitality. Hundreds of thousands of people wanting to get home, fighting to get home. Perfectly lovely."

They made a tentative dash to cross but were thwarted by an Army lorry, and Rose Anne resumed her discourse from the kerb.

"I must say, Bell, you have an eye for position. All the dear old tabbies and sweet little kittens from the suburbs will simply love a place right among the best shops. I can hear the clatter already; the amount of gossip talked in one single afternoon will be simply dreadful. Isn't it a pity you're one stair up?"

"It will give them just what they want—the feeling of being confidential and exclusive—and they'll jolly well pay for it. As for gossip, the more the better: more cups of tea, more buns. Come on now!"

They scampered across the street through a gap in the traffic, Rose Anne shouting "Jewess!" after her sister to the great mystification of an elderly solicitor who, waiting for a tram to take him home to the West End, stepped out of the queue to let them through and so lost his place. These modern girls baffled him. Wild creatures!

The first floor above the furrier's might have been a showroom or the counting house of a great industrial establishment. Now it was an echoing expanse of floor-space broken only along the walls by the trestles, platforms and paint-pots of the decorators and by a pile of large parcels in a far corner. The air was filled with the acrid smell

of turpentine. In the light of a single inverted bowl against the ceiling the foreman painter was stepping out of his white duck overalls.

This was to become the Tuckshop as Rose Anne had facetiously nicknamed it. This was going to be, in fact, Bluebell's. Not Bluebell's Tearoom or Bluebell's Restaurant; not the Bluebell Tearoom or the Bluebell Restaurant. Just Bluebell's. It gave Juley Oliphant's eldest daughter a grim satisfaction to exploit the commercial possibilities of her ludicrous Christian name. She knew precisely how the little touch of the intimate possessive would appeal to the kind, cosy, ambitious female customers she planned to exploit.

Lunches and afternoon teas, no more; open only between noon and 5 p.m. The aim was exclusively at the well-to-do woman in for a day's shopping in the city. She and Betty Bell had worked it all out long ago; it was a deliberately snobbish extension of the popular trade done at the Miller's Barn. Everything would be good: food, cooking, service, home baking, napery, cutlery, flowers—down to a rest room so saucily alluring and flattering that the chooser of its furnishings and decorations, Rose Anne Oliphant, said that she was ashamed of it and really shocked Bluebell by describing it as an exercise in the Higher Lesbianism.

Rose Anne went off to confer with the foreman painter, but Bell remained standing near the door, furnishing and peopling the great room. She saw the thick smoke-blue carpet that was to cost a fortune, the tables and chairs in Japanese oak, the plates and cups and saucers in the egg-yoke yellow Rose Anne had chosen, her smart, healthy waitresses in quaker grey wrappers and goffred caps—and not a girl would work in Bluebell's without being neatly shod!—and the heaped trolley-tables which, pushed by pretty, observant young girls, were to replace those old-fashioned cakestands she abominated.

Moving slowly to the far end, seeing pictures in her mind all the way, Bluebell saw the joiners were making a start with the partition for the kitchen, and that the gas people had also made a move. The customers were to see into the kitchen if they were interested, just as they would be invited to watch the processes in the home-bakery that was to be set up in a chamber running backwards off the main room. ("Get the customer's confidence. Give her something to talk about," said the wise voice of Betty Bell.) Ah! if only this weary war would really stop and let the supplies come forward, let her enrol her first little army of strong, healthy, cheerful girls out of the munition factories!

Rose Anne and the foreman painter were bickering professionally over fabrics and strips of paper under the bowl of light.

"Duck-egg green is duck-egg green, man!" Bluebell heard her half-sister declare. "It isn't a muddy mixture of pea green and skimmed milk."

"That's only the first coat!" the man protested. "Wait till you see the finished job."

"And how could the finished job be right with that horrible undercoating, like a pig's breakfast? Look at my lovely pastel shades in the curtain against your awful tones."

"Don't you worry, miss. It'll all come right before we're finished."

"I'm sure it will," Bell intervened. "Come on, Rosie, we ought to be getting home."

"And I could be doing with a pint," agreed the foreman painter robustly. He winked at Bluebell and grinned as Rose Anne moved away to replace the curtain on its proper bundle in the corner of the echoing room.

"She's a warrior, that!" he said appreciatively. "But she knows her stuff."

Bluebell thought of that as they went home together, packed close together in a sort of garden seat on the top of a swaying tramcar. When Rose Anne was active and interested her concentration was intense. It seemed that dear Rose Anne lived almost painfully in spasms and spent the rest of her existence recuperating in langour and dreams. It was so different with herself, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, who worried and thought all the time but strove always to keep herself in hand: so that equability and order had almost become her fetishes. She liked to think that the artist in Rose Anne had stemmed from that old great-grandfather, Julius Oliphant, who had dropped a fortune in maintaining the beauty of sailing ships; and she was grimly amused to reflect that it had assuredly not come out of the horsey, hard-drinking Hercus's. And what would heredity do for Chris, the as-yet unknown child of the unknown Harriet Macdonald?

After dinner they had the child down in nightie and dressing-gown for her privileged half-hour before the fire in the lounge. Rose Anne drew for her, and the infant sat on a stool at her knee in an open-mouthed ecstasy of concentration on the marvellous symbols which grew under the slim, dexterous fingers. The game was the designing of the child's Christmas card, to be her very own. It had been going on for weeks, the idea changing from day to day as Rose Anne's fancy roamed from fairyland and Alpine valleys to the Rabelaisian realities that are among the most pleasurable excitements of infancy. Some of her sister's bolder embroideries on the chamber pot theme had worried Bluebell.

"I really don't think you should encourage the poor child," she had argued earnestly. "I suppose it's harmless really, but I hate messy children with nasty, messy minds."

"Born in dear Queen Victoria's middle years," Rose Anne had intoned as one reading from an old-fashioned biography, "our heroine brought to her domestic responsibilities . . . For the Lord's sake, Bell! The kid's mind is as clean as Bridgie's kitchen table. She enjoys what she calls 'rudenesses'! Therefore the lavatory joke is a natural expression of the pure female mind. That's what they call a syllogism, my dear, and you don't need to worry in the least about Chris. She's got what you've got and poor me hasn't."

"What's that?"

"Guts. Stability."

"I wish we had some of your talent, Rosie dear," Bluebell murmured.

"Talent! A first-rate artist—in the fourth class."

"I don't understand."

"No."

Rose Anne was a puzzle, but it was part of Bluebell's happiness that in her lazy, spasmodic way she loved Chris. You would imagine that, if Chris were ever in danger, it would be Rose Anne who would fight like a spitting cat against her despoilers. The solidarity of the three Oliphant girls was a strange thing, but it was a fact.

The child hugged and kissed, and carried up to the nursery piccy-back on Bridget's shoulders—Hannah being out visiting one of her numerous friends who were always dying of intricate diseases in far-flung hospitals—the calm of late evening filled the room. Bell bent over a bag of darning, her hair gleaming in the light of the standard lamp. Rose Anne, outstretched on the chesterfield, read the evening paper and yawned at intervals, the crackling of the sheet and her sighs as inordinately loud as the spurts of flame in the fire or the hum of a tramcar gathering speed in the distance. She laughed suddenly and dropped the paper on to the floor.

"I keep wondering what the Boys will say about the Tuckshop," she chuckled. "Can't you just see Ambrose's face?"

"They won't like it," Bell agreed with a short laugh.

"What's the latest move, by the way?"

"O, there's a new one almost every week! The latest idea, Mr. Galbraith tells me, is that Ambrose is going to raise some sort of action to take Chris back; he's her legal guardian or next-of-kin or something."

"That's our Jerome," observed Rose Anne cheerfully. "Always the decisive man of action—and just about as strong, really, as a starved pussycat. They won't do anything."

"No, I suppose not," Bell agreed. "But they will be terribly happy and important, thinking of all the dramatic things they might do."

"Poor dears! Ah, well!" Rose Anne heaved herself off the couch and stood up, stretching her arms lazily. "I'm all for the *fait accompli*. You're a marvel, Bell dear! The way you walked us out of that mortuary and planked us down here. It's like being born again; I never knew I could be so happy. Now I'm going up to indulge myself in a terribly hot bath and a long read in bed. Good night, dear!" she said, stooping to kiss her sister's cheek. "You're a gem."

"Good night, darling! And *do* put the light out before you fall asleep!"

Bell was left with the guttering fire and the distant zoom of the trams, and she envied her half-sister's lazy detachment. She was herself never free from worry. O! it had been fine and bold to walk out of Agincourt at the head of her small regiment of women, but as against the feeble fools in the West Room it was a trivial victory in a skirmish. Here, in Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, she had chosen her ground for the real battle.

It hurt her most that complete confidence had been stolen from her by Papa during all those long years of her servitude to his intolerance and contempt. Her most decisive actions would always be dogged by her self-mistrust. Sometimes in the bleak mid-hours of the night she could weep to think of what she had taken on of responsibility in the venture that was for Rose Anne only an amusing Tuckshop: practically all her fortune involved already in goods and pledges at inflated war-time prices; all her future—and therefore those of Rose Anne and Chris, as she saw it—uneasily dependent on the subtleties of competition and her own adequacy as a manager in commerce!

That thought could be terrifying when the great bell in the University tower sent three harsh waves of sound over the moonlit roofs and only a faint tooting of railway whistles, occasionally the throaty bellow of a ship's siren from the docks, suggested the continuing existence of a normal world. Then Rose Anne's picture of herself as one of those wonderful managing women seemed a bitter parody of fact. She, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, was only a defenceless, ignorant, spasmodically energetic female, making amateurish passes at the problem of living, backed only by a handful of inherited wealth.

It it had been herself alone . . . Ah, nothing in that! She had mattered little enough to herself since on one bitter day in late 1917, eagerly and perhaps too zealously questioning men of a convoy of sullen wounded soldiers from Passchendaele, she had suddenly and firmly decided that the hope of Jack Alston's survival in the slaughterhouse of the Western Front was a sentimental mirage . . . The terrible

thing was that, in her own need to escape, she had involved Rose Anne and Chris, Bridget and Hannah.

No, it was not the money. They could always live together on what Mr. Galbraith, the lawyer, aridly termed the *legitim* of Papa's diminished estate: even if that meant contesting the terms of his will and going back into the involved and scrubby affair of the Marriage Contract between Papa and the hopeful, but careful, representative of Kate Hercus. Her dreadful responsibility was the making of a proper life and home and background for Rose Anne and Chris; it was a cure of souls she had wilfully assumed. Often Bell wondered bitterly if, in kicking up her heels at the West Room, she had not run blindly into the danger of creating its feminine courterpart in Number Four, Dunedin Terrace: the rooms of her beloved flat so many nesting boxes for broody or sterile hens.

The fire collapsed, and she made no move to build it up again. She heard the bath water running away upstairs. That daft girl must have wallowed there for at least an hour, dreaming. Hannah's flat, stoutly-shod feet plodded up the stone stairs outside. Her Yale key turned in the lock. A kettle was filled at the kitchen sink, and the gas plopped. Bridget, the old soldier of so many long campaigns, would be delighted to see her colleague back again with fine tales of suffering patiently borne and death piously faced; she would be still more delighted to have her last, fresh, steaming cup of the beverage that so strangely but consistently maintains the female spirit.

Bluebell was cheered by these familiar noises. She was no longer alone. She rose from her chair and started punching the cushions of the chesterfield She picked up the evening paper Rose Anne had dropped on the floor in her careless way and folded it, thinking how it would help to kindle a fire. Order was necessary. There always had to be somebody to impose order on any household. That was why she had insisted on dinner being served promptly each evening at half-past six. Left to herself, Rose Anne would cheerfully exist on odd sandwiches and skittles of tea; the maids, even the very best of them, would grow careless and lazy and untidy. Order: that was the thing.

So she tidied up. She would have a bath too, thanks to that miraculous boiler. Bridget and Hannah, who took baths ceremonially once a week and always in the late afternoon, would not be long.

The responsibility remained, a weight of lead on her spirits. Chris was only an infant, with years to go before she could manage for herself. And Jack Alston was dead. Bluebell thought of his unimportant bones, the ugly basket that had held the brain and heart and guts of a man intelligent beyond the ordinary, taking shape under the mud or, perhaps, cleanly calcined by the lime of France.

2

In the thin sunshine of a day in January, 1919, two gentlemen walked slowly along the pavement by the gardens opposite Number Four, Dunedin Terrace. Dressed alike in bowler hats and dark overcoats of the finest material and cut, each carrying an umbrella neatly rolled, they were clearly persons of substance. One was inclining to stoutness in his early middle-age, his handsome but rather stupid face adorned by a fair moustache in the military fashion of an earlier era. His companion was taller, clean shaven and featured in the legal pattern; he smoked a cigarette and flicked off its ash with surprisingly loud cracks of middle finger and thumb.

A watcher of the scene—say, from behind a curtain in one of the flats of Dunedin Terrace—might have discerned a slightly furtive element in the progress of these two persons. It was not at all the time of day you would expect to see gentlemen of the upper business or professional class passing through a residential quarter. It was the time of day—and the bell in the University tower banged the announcement that it lacked but half-an-hour from noon—when professional gentlemen were in their offices or in court or visiting their patients by car. You might have guessed at partners in an old firm of solicitors returning from the signing of a wealthy widow's Trust Disposition and Settlement on her death-bed. A more lurid mind might have imagined an enterprise of high-class private detection, with evidence for a society divorce in prospect.

"Anybody at the windows, Jerry?" asked the older and plumper of the two men, nearest the railings of the Gardens. He spoke in a strangulated and conspiratorial tone out of the corner of his mouth.

"No. Quite safe. Have a look."

The two gentlemen halted, grounded the ferrules of their rolled umbrellas, and considered the dignified façade of Dunedin Terrace.

"Seems a fairly decent sort of place," Ambrose Oliphant allowed after a due pause for observation and thought. "Doctors' plates all along the row. But a flat, my God! I hope she's got a bathroom."

"And a top flat at that!" Jerome added bitterly. "Filthy stairs. Horrible stink of cats. A drying green at the back the size of a postage stamp. Just look at those bloody window-boxes!"

"A pity," said Ambrose. "Let's get to hell out of here."

This melancholy inspection of their sinful sister's home completed to their satisfaction, the Oliphant brothers proceeded along Dunedin Terrace, turned down a cobbled lane with the surprising and charming name of Pirnmill Meuse, and waited under a red sign for a tram to take them back into the heart of the city.

" I'll have a word or two to say this afternoon," intimated Jerome vehemently, throwing the match that had lit his sixteenth cigarette of the day into the gutter, much as if he were casting away an evil insect.

Ten minutes later the brothers, now inconspicuous among the crowd milling up and down the street of great shops, stood on the pavement opposite the furrier's corner and considered the premises in which their regrettable sister proposed to launch out in business as a caterer. The spectacle was somewhat disappointing in its simplicity. All they observed at first was a range of windows discreetly curtained with a pastel-shaded fabric, as it might be a warehouse floor converted to the requirements of a fashionable and expensive modiste. The size of the premises impressed them, but they were subtly disappointed by the absence of any glaring sign along the frontage to the main street.

" Dam' great barn of a place," was Ambrose's first observation, summing up his first impressions. " Bet you what you like, Jerry, she's sunk every penny she has in this idiotic scheme."

" And piled up a damned great overdraft as well," added Jerome viciously. " Next thing we'll have is a bankruptcy and a public scandal."

" I must say," Ambrose allowed, " it's something that she hasn't plastered the place with our name. That's what frightened me."

" You never know what she'll be up to. Wouldn't be surprised if she stuck up one of those dam' great glaring things in red lights."

" God forbid ! But, I say, isn't that something above the side-door there ? "

" Let's cross and see."

The Oliphant brothers negotiated the passage among the trams, Jerome violently warning the drivers with flourishes of his rolled umbrella, and shortly they were standing under a sign that projected from above the modest entrance to the restaurant on a rod of ornamental wrought-iron. It was such a sign as might, in England, have graced the doorway of a discreet publishing house or the entrance to an expensive wine merchant's. In quite modest cursive script, in blue against a light polished oak, it bore the simple legend BLUEBELL'S.

" And what the devil is that supposed to mean ? " asked Jerome testily. " Might be a confounded barber's."

" Or one of those fortune-telling places," added Ambrose. " Tea and buns. Not a drop of liquor in the place. My God ! Which reminds me, Jerry, where shall we lunch ? "

" They give you a dam' good chop at the Kensington."

" Yes, but their drinks are filthy. I vote for Joey's. Always get a dam' nice glass of sherry at Joey's. Even a Tio Pepe. Always im-

ported his own stuff direct, even during the war. And if it's a grill you want——"

"Yes, let's try Joey's. I forgot about Joey's."

This decision made, the two seniors in the Oliphant male line marched on, two provincial gentlemen on important business moving almost majestically abreast down the steep streets into the business quarter of the city. They were in fine mature form when, at 2.45 p.m. as by arrangement, they presented themselves at the writing chambers of Messrs. Mar, Gellatly and Cross and were shown promptly and with gratifying deference into the room of the senior partner, Mr. Ewen Galbraith.

Bluebell had arrived before them. A slight figure in dark and simple clothes she rose from her chair by the lawyer's side and advanced to meet them cheerfully.

"Hulla, Ambrose! Hullo, Jerome! It's nice to see you again. Is that housekeeper looking after you properly?"

This was not as the Oliphant brothers had anticipated the scene. They had expected more frigidity, more dignity, at what was after all —and dam' it all!—an important and delicate conference. Jerome showed his disapproval in a curt handshake, a nod to the lawyer and a twist of his thin lips. Ambrose was as one who, puffy by natural habit, had taken a jab at the midriff.

"How do, Bell?" he responded quite heartily. "The housekeeper? She's doing well, jolly well. Isn't she, Jerry? Perfect marvel with savouries especially! . . . O, how do, Mr. Galbraith?"

Mr. Galbraith was a detached person with an enormous and almost completely bald head, culminating in a shining and eccentric dome of skull that suggested to the flippant the contours of the Rock of Gibraltar, but he had wise eyes and a disciplined sense of the tragi-comedy of those human passions, out of the handling of which in their legal aspects he made a good five thousand pounds a year. His father had been Iron Jock's man of affairs, and his knowledge of all the issues involved in this meeting of sister and brothers—the legal, the human, the psychological, and the rational issues—was extensive, peculiar, sympathetic and amused at once.

"Now we are all here," he began, "meeting in friendly conference, I think we start on the understanding that none of us wants litigation —that is, to go into open court (and considering your family's position it is bound to be very open)—over a family affair."

Bluebell nodded. Ambrose uttered a hearty "Absolutely!" Jerome intervened with a crisp "Wait a moment!" But Mr. Galbraith ignored Jerome and proceeded smoothly.

"The family has broken up since your father's death in March of last year. That, in my long experience, is very common among

grown-up families. In this case, Miss Bluebell"—and the woman of that unhappy name winced at this open demonstration of its absurdity—" has chosen to leave the old home, set up an establishment in the city here, and launch out on a business venture of her own."

" Yes, but why ? " wailed Ambrose.

" That's just the point," snapped Jerome.

" Gentlemen, we are discussing purely legal issues now," persisted Mr. Galbraith patiently. " You may like it, or you may not like it, but your sister has seriously and finally decided to take this course. Is that right, Miss Oliphant ? "

" Quite right," said Bluebell softly.

" So no legal question arises," the lawyer persisted smoothly, " Miss Bluebell can do exactly as she pleases within the law, even to the point "—and this he threw somewhat defiantly at the brothers—" of plastering the West End of this city with the family name."

" And I wouldn't dream of that ! " Bluebell laughed.

" No," Mr. Galbraith agreed with a smile, " of course not. But that, Mr. Oliphant," he suddenly shot at Jerome, " is what you envisaged in several of your letters."

" Well, we were amazed, worried—naturally . . . Can one dare to smoke in this place ? "

" By all means . . . Then there is the case of your half-sister, Rose Anne. This is more difficult. She is—what ?—nearly twenty. But the fact is, gentlemen, that she chooses to adhere to her half-sister, Miss Bluebell. I would doubt very much if any action on your part could have much hope of success. That is, legally as well as practically."

" That's not the point at all ! "

The voice was Jerome's, with the familiar bark of bogus strength in it. Mr. Galbraith turned on him with a mild smile.

" May I ask what is the point then, Mr. Oliphant ? "

" The point is that the whole thing was a fly-by-night affair. Our sister cleared out and took two of our oldest servants with her. We'll keep Rose Anne out of it if you like, but she takes Chris, an infant, away from her legal guardian. She leaves the household to the mercies of a completely strange woman. In fact, she doesn't seem to care a rap about our comfort, our position in the town—the whole appearances of the thing."

" Ah, appearances ! " said the lawyer, raising his eyebrows. " But you raise several points, Mr. Oliphant, and I shall take them *seriatim* . . . I gather from your sister that the position was discussed regularly throughout a month before she left Agincourt, and that from the first she clearly intimated her intentions to you. Hardly a fly-by-night affair, Mr. Oliphant."

"Well, but——"

"The two senior servants chose to accompany their mistress. Or do you really suggest some sinister form of duress? Surely not."

"No. Still——"

"As a lawyer I cannot be interested in questions of comfort, position or appearance. There remains the question of the child, Chris, and that is the crux of the matter. Mr. Ambrose is in fact her legal guardian. I simply must warn you, gentlemen, that if you choose to force the issue—ignoring appearances, by the way—it might very well be found that the courts would exercise discretion in favour of Miss Bluebell, who is obviously a mature, competent and wholly suitable guardian for a young girl."

"That remains to be seen," snapped Jerome, violently hammering a fresh cigarette on the back of his gold case.

Bell was suddenly sick of the whole business. It was depressing and degrading to be wrangling in this dark lawyer's room with its dull walls, its dull pictures of lantern-jawed celebrities, the dull books in the dull cases, and the wire frames on the lower windows, denying the light of day. She was even exasperated by the untidiness of the fireplace, so thick with dust and ashes that she longed to drop on her knees there and then and sweep it up.

"O, chuck it, Jerome!" she cried impatiently. "We're just wasting time. You know perfectly well you'd be horrified if I handed Chris back to you to-night to bring up by yourself."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"Ambrose," Bluebell turned more kindly to her oldest brother. "I beg you to drop it before Jerome makes it a real quarrel. Believe me, I don't want that to happen. It needn't. Why shouldn't we stay friends?"

"Well, why not, if it comes to that?" replied Ambrose with difficulty, his face flushing puffily.

"It's so simple!" Bell continued to plead for reason. "Of course we'll all visit you regularly if you will have us. I do want you to come to see us—have a meal when you are in Town, a bed if you're kept late. I specially want Chris to be free from any feeling of strangeness whatsoever, and I'd particularly like it, Ambrose, if you'll ask her to Inverquey now and again and let her enjoy what we all enjoyed so much when we were young."

"Certainly, certainly!" puffed Ambrose, truly gratified.

"Yes, but there's an argument here——" Jerome began.

"No, no, no, Mr. Oliphant!" the lawyer intervened with a deliberate smile and rose. "We must take this now on a purely *de facto* basis. I most earnestly recommend the dropping of any idea of litigation and a commonsense acceptance of a situation which, as

your sister suggests, shouldn't be a source of trouble among intelligent adults."

Flattered by the epithet, the Oliphant brothers, speaking through Ambrose, said that it looked as if there was not much more to say, shook hands and departed with dignity. On their way to the station they seriously debated whether the thing was to have a cup of tea and catch the 4.25 or wait for the fast 5.20 and have time for a couple of quick snifters in the Ratpit. They decided on the more dignified course of action as befitted men who had been heavily engaged in affairs of moment.

Ambrose and Jerome Oliphant did not speak much of the matter as they travelled home, each behind an evening paper. When the first-class carriage emptied at the second stop they threw at each other a few of those curt phrases that had so long served Papa and his sons to dismiss triumphantly any awkward situation they chanced to encounter.

"Well, I suppose that's that," was Ambrose's tentative opening.

"She can dam' well stew in her own juice now," said Jerome.

"A pity. Never know where you are with women nowadays."

"The war," Jerome explained it all. "All this munitions nonsense. Big wages for doing sweet dam' all. What do you expect?"

These two grown men were really filled with a deep sense of satisfaction in having taken part in an affair of importance. It would not be long before Jerome, at least, would be indicating that he had somehow succeeded in scoring a first-class forensic triumph.

Their younger brothers were waiting for them before the fire in the West Room. Tristram, not long demobilized on discharge from a naval hospital, looked up with markedly heavy eyes.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"All settled. Forget about it," Jerome replied crisply. "And look here, young man—you go easy with that decanter or you'll be back in hospital before you know where you are."

3

The pestilence came off the battlefields and out of the starving cities of Europe, though they called it the Spanish influenza, and it struck at the weary and undernourished victors as fiercely as at the still unhappier vanquished. It was the plague again, mankind's recurrent punishment of fever and subtle poison, levelling all: the young, the old, the innocent, the wicked, the just, the unjust, the weak and the strong alike.

It was as if the guns and the poison gas, no longer of use on the

battlefield for the slaughter of men in uniform, were maliciously allowing the civilian populations a demonstration of what a casualty list means. A man might be your familiar neighbour in the same carriage of a suburban train, and one morning he would be missing and would never come back. The milkboy with cheerful face and piercing whistle would be replaced by a duller lad, and you learned from the woman at the dairy that the whistle was silenced for ever.

The public conscience, dulled perhaps by years of calamitous news and loud noises, sluggish and tired after long strain, never rose to the sense of the crisis through which it was passing. Men and women struggled along a tunnel of negation towards the dim promise of light at its far end, and those who dropped by the way in the prevalent darkness died much as those homeless ones who, pushing their little handcarts, had fallen out to die by the thousand in the ditches along thousands of miles of European highway.

There was a great fear abroad, but there was more fatalism ; and there were many to dance and drink the crisis through. The plague would strike or it would not. If it did not, then it hardly mattered to European mankind in one of its suicidal moods ; if it did, there it was everywhere, filling the private life with alarm and despair. Only doctors, nurses, hospital attendants, ambulance drivers, undertakers, ministers of religion and perhaps a handful of civil servants saw the visitation in all its tragic continuity.

There was one cold, wet morning in February when the Spanish 'flu was for Bluebell Oliphant only a faintly alarming threat. It was nearer to her than to most people, perhaps, for her restaurant was now open and busy, and the maintenance of an efficient staff was already a problem and an obsession ; also she worried over her special responsibility for Chris. Still, as she went out into the wet rawness of that morning, and though the damp sourness of the atmosphere within a tramcar reminded her of the danger, the 'flu was something that troubled other people. Then, by the early evening, the lurking enemy was in the house, something to be fought bitterly at close quarters.

Rose Anne had come home at noon, squeamish and light-headed, listless and flushed, and Bridget had sensibly packed her off to bed with a hot bottle, a cup of tea and two aspirins. Bridget was not afraid of illness, nor would she in fact allow any special virulence in this sickness they were all talking about. Just the good old-fashioned winter chill, Bridget maintained frequently, reiterating her belief that the cure, if folk would only have some sense, was in keeping the bowels open and the mind easy. In mid-afternoon, however, even Bridget's confidence shook a little. Rose Anne was so obviously ill. She was talking queerly to Bridget's way of thinking and, when offered a glass of milk-and-soda, said petulantly and bitterly, but decisively :

"Bridget, I wish you'd get out of here and leave me alone. You're just nagging me."

That decided it. When her sweet pretty pet talked to old Bridgie like that there was something really wrong; but keeping her head as always, she rang the doctor's house before getting through to her mistress. The tired and not too courteous voice of the doctor's receptionist informed her that Dr. Stirling had been out all day and was likely to be out all night, and that Miss Oliphant must take her turn. Bell came racing to the door in a taxi, within twenty minutes.

"Rose Anne, darling!" she said softly, moving towards her sister's bed.

"This is it, Bell," said Rose Anne sourly. "I want to be sick, and I can't. I want to sleep, and I'll never be able to again. My head . . . all buzzing and hot and aching inside and out. Such filthy, humiliating misery."

"The doctor is coming, dear."

"And what good do you think that'll do?" Rose Anne suddenly blazed, her flushed face hostile. "O, for God's sake, go away and leave me alone, Bell, or I'll say something awful to you!"

It was nine o'clock in the evening before the doctor came. He was by nature a thin, pale-faced little man, but the anxious and intelligent brown eyes behind the rimless spectacles were ringed with the shadowy grooves of fatigue. His examination of the patient seemed to Bell on the hasty side, but his nod across the bed to suggest they should meet in another room was bright with understanding.

Bridget had put a kettle of coffee, a decanter, a syphon and a plate of sandwiches on a trolley table in the lounge.

"I think you need something, Dr. Stirling," said Bell. "Spirits or coffee?"

The little man's surprise was a pleasure to witness. He had the pleased look of an official who is suddenly recognized to be a human being.

"Well, that's wonderful!" he cried. "Fourteen hours on my feet to-day, and nobody else thought of it. I felt like the villain of the piece all the time. No, the coffee, if you please. The other stuff's tempting, and that's just the trouble. Now, your sister——"

"This Spanish 'flu, I suppose?"

"A typical case in its early stages. Temperature not too bad as yet—just over one-O-one—but it's bound to rise. Her pulse is a bit fluttery, but nothing out of the ordinary. Keep her warm. Give her very light food as she'll take it, and that won't be often. Let her have fifteen grains of aspirin to-night. I'll give you two prescriptions. Really, Miss Oliphant," the doctor suddenly burst out in a sort of desperate confidence, "there's so little we can do except watch,

watch, watch for the turn to pneumonia. Nothing but good nursing. She's young and strong enough."

Bluebell asked a question, thinking of Chris.

" In all this city, Miss Oliphant," said Dr. Stirling gravely, " there isn't an empty bed in any nursing home or hospital that I know. There isn't a nurse who isn't worn to the bone. There isn't a doctor who isn't half-hypnotized by the same recurrent symptoms in score upon score of cases. People don't realize. If they'd only release more doctors from the Services. But I've got four more calls before I'm finished. I'll be in to-morrow."

The car drove off into the mysterious darkness, taking the pale, tired little man towards another bedside, and Bell sat down to organize her mind.

It was not easy. Fear threatened to confuse her. You could go on and on living efficiently and happily enough, coping as they came with all the problems of money and human relationships ; and then, out of the blue, the fear of death fell upon you, rendering all else trivial. Illness in the house was a paralysis—or the only reality at all. It meant a special, detached, shadowed existence for the few who cared deeply for any one sufferer. The thought that Rose Anne might die, this awful thing with which she must live for days, nearly had Bluebell crying and beating the cushions in despair.

But it was the quality of her mind and the essence of her experience that one must organize a front to crisis : the necessity that was also a sedative. For a moment her troubled mind turned to the thought that so many other women in this position were finding relief in prayer, solace in the lovely ritual of the Churches and the assurances of Holy Writ, but there was no help for Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant there. The need for order always obsessed her : order in arrangement, the non-mystical and yet aesthetically satisfying approach to every problem.

The plan for to-morrow began to take shape. Be assured that Rose Anne held her own. Dash down to the Tuckshop for an hour. (Thank God for the complete competence of Bridget !) Ring those tiresome tea people and tell them to take back their last low-quality consignment. Buy lovely flowers for Rose Anne's room. Valentine's meat juice. Brandy. Anything that was lacking in Bridget's store cupboard . . . The line of practical thought was flowing fast, and she was on her way to the kitchen and almost at the door when the telephone bell started ringing in the hall. Angry for Rose Anne's sake she stopped it by leaping to lift the receiver of the extension into the lounge.

The noises within the instrument told her that the call was from a distance. A stuffy voice shouting swear-words, exactly as Papa used

to do, let her understand that Ambrose was at the other end of the line. Minutes passed before he could be convinced by the operator, with Bluebell's assistance, that he was actually and clearly in communication with his sister.

"O, that you Bell? Here, I say . . . Damn you, keep off the line! I'm talking to my sister. How in Heaven's name can I remember what the number was? I was talking to her a minute ago. If you'd only stop asking silly questions . . ."

"You're talking to me, Ambrose. This is Bell speaking."

(The lunacy of it! The dance of the dwarves of egotism in the shadow of death!)

"O, yes. Bell! Sorry! It's those blithering asses at the Exchange. I say, Bell, a dreadful thing's happened. Tristram's gone and caught this beastly Spanish 'flu."

"O, dear! So has Rose Anne."

"Good God!"

"Have you had the doctor in?"

"Yes, but Jerry and I—I mean to say, we've got nobody to nurse him, and if the dam' thing were to spread . . ."

"Surely your housekeeper can manage. I certainly can't leave Rose Anne."

She understood completely the state of affairs in Agincourt. Her brothers were feckless in the face of domestic emergency. Emergencies were things that should not be allowed to approach the Oliphant Boys. Ambrose and Rupert would be trembling for their own skins. Off-stage conversation reached her ears along the crackling line. Of course, Jerome was at Ambrose's elbow, telling him what to say, and no dam' nonsense about it.

"Well, Bell, it's very difficult for us all," Ambrose resumed, "but you see how we're placed. I don't see how we can leave Tris to servants—damned if I do. Well, I do mean to say, all things considered, no women of our own sort to give us a hand . . . I think I'm entitled to be frank . . . I mean to say we'd like your advice. Doctor says the boy's pretty ill."

"O, dear!"

She was in the old trap again, torn among her sneaking fondness for Ambrose, her pity for any sufferer, her lingering sense of duty and her horror of inefficiency.

"Look here, Ambrose. If Rose Anne's no worse to-morrow, I'll run down with the 9.35."

"That will be splendid, Bell!" came the glad voice from the other end. "Jolly fine! I'll be there with the car to meet you at the West."

"Thank you, Ambrose. But I'm not staying, you know. I've got

Rose Anne to look after, and my own business ; and if Rose Anne is bad you mustn't expect me. But I'll ring you."

" Good egg ! Splendid, Bell ! I'll meet you off the 9.35." Ambrose was delighted to see a short cut out of discomfort opening up before him. " Good night."

And he hadn't thought of sending a little word of greeting to Rose Anne ! thought Bell as she crept softly into her sister's room.

" Who was the ass at the other end of the 'phone ? " asked Rose Anne sourly. " I could just hear a babble, babble, babble. My head's splitting."

" Sorry dear ! " whispered Bluebell. " It was Ambrose. He sent his regards."

" I don't want Ambrose's regards."

" Tristram's taken it."

" Everybody's taking it—taking it—taking it. O Lord ! Have I started a silly song running through my head ? "

" You're going to sleep," said Bell, firm and patient. " These three aspirins. Water. I'll hold you up. There ! I'll be sitting up for a bit. But sleep, Rosie, sleep. Good night, darling ! "

She kissed the hot cheek, rapidly tidied quilt, sheets and bed-table, and switched out the light. Bridget and Hannah were waiting for her in the kitchen. Unanimously they declared that not a wink of sleep would they have that night, not while Miss Rose was bad, the poor soul, and as bonnie and sweet as they are made. They agreed to keep vigil in turn before the fire in the lounge whence, should the sick girl ring, the bell in the kitchen could be heard.

" And I'll just lay out the tea-things and a biscuit on the trolley-table," announced Bridget, thoroughly enjoying the sense of crisis and her own competence to face it. " We'll need it. And I suppose I could give the poor lass a cup of tea if she wants it ? O, and I'll put some milk in a pan. See you, Hannah, and keep it covered if it's not wanted."

But Rose Anne neither rang for attention nor asked for nourishment. As the three older women, one by one at intervals throughout the night, crept into the sickroom her eyes seemed wide open and staring in the shaded candle light. She asked only to be left alone. She thought she might have slept. How could she know when everything was going round and round in her head ?

The doctor came early next day.

" My first call, Miss Oliphant. A small return for that lovely coffee of yours. Do you realize, seriously, if I hadn't had that little bit of stimulant and food at precisely that moment, I'd have been pretty near collapse myself ? That's the confounded thing. We're all working on desperately narrow margins. Now, your patient."

He looked happier, brisker than as Bluebell had seen him barely twelve hours before. A competent little person. He didn't fuss Rose Anne.

"Just the normal course of a normal case," he told Bluebell when they were back in the lounge. "Warmth, nourishment. Yes, the meat juice by all means. Calves' foot jelly. Tea—yes. Thin bread and butter if she'll take it. Anything light and wholesome. People take such wild notions. I've one patient whose dear wife wants to nourish him on roast guinea-fowl because he used to like it so much. You're getting those prescriptions made up? I'll perhaps look in late this evening."

". . . What's that? A brother in Garvel. O dear! Well, I suppose you can. There's very little fear of any crisis for a while yet, and you have good servants in the house. Let's see—one, two, three—say, six hours. But I'd like to think you'd be home by the evening. You never know with this beastly thing. Look—I've got to go across to the Southern. If you could be ready in, say, five minutes . . ."

The doctor's 'car dropped Bluebell at the Main with just five minutes to spare. It seemed to take a terribly long time to get a ticket against the deliberately hostile inertia of a booking clerk, a longer time to cover the furlongs of spittled concrete between the main station building and Platform 17, away out on its boreal promontory of the windy terminus.

She dropped with relief into a corner seat of a carriage, empty but reeking sourly of old tobacco smoke. It was a sudden, sensual pleasure to hear the yelp of the whistle, the grinding jolt of the train start, and then the smooth turning of the wheels.

To catch a train was somehow to get away—from what? It was an escaping. So many things keep flinging themselves at you in the normal, static life, to have the little world of a railway compartment to one's self was a sort of rebirth. It was horrible to feel in the early forenoon that you were already tired: so many circumstances and personalities racing you to an unknown goal, fouling you, overtaking you. Bluebell, half-dozing with her head against the uncomfortable corner, saw passing through her mind the cinematic record of Rugger matches she had seen, and she thought of how she had passionately identified herself with a strong player who, getting away with the ball, might run as strongly as God gave him the power to do in the glory of his youth, and who yet might be thwarted by any one of fifteen nimble enemies or even halted by a tuft of grass, a patch of mud or the incalculable bounce of an oval ball.

Ambrose and Jerome were both at the station with the Napier to receive her, and she appreciated this measure of their concern and their odd, perverted satisfaction in the importance of the event. Her

merciless eye discerned that, of these two brothers of hers, Jerome was by far the more perturbed, grey of face and much less inclined than usual to dismiss a difficulty with a snap of his lean fingers. Slightly more intelligent than Ambrose, he was slightly more afraid of the idea of death in general as of his own skin.

"There's one thing, Bell," he addressed her earnestly as the big car swept them westwards out of the region of tall tenement houses into that of villas increasing in size. "I don't mind telling you that young Tristram has been lifting the old elbow pretty freely these last two or three years. War strain and that sort of thing, but there it is."

"Young beggar was up to a bottle a day at least," added Ambrose, not without pride.

"So, when you see the doctor this morning, it might not be a bad idea to drop him a hint. Hardly the thing for us to say anything about it. But I've a notion that if he's been used to the stuff, he shouldn't be cut off at the main right away. In fact, I don't mind telling you that I've been allowing him a tot now and again."

"I suppose you should," agreed Bell morosely. She added: "You'll be glad to hear Rose Anne's no worse, at least."

"Oh, yes! Good!"

She was to meet the doctor. She was to negotiate on behalf of the Boys. She had not escaped after all. She was just the usual fool of a woman, and all the more a fool for being Papa's daughter.

She considered Tristram on his sick-bed and thought how little she knew of this young man who had been a baby while she was a preoccupied and unhappy little girl, a schoolboy while she had been growing up. The lank hair on the pillow was long and damp; the pinched modelling of the muscles under and about the bold nose suggested experience acquired far from the security of the West Room. He was very ill, she saw with eyes now sharpened to the vagaries of the plague, and the heavy, bloodshot eyes confirmed Jerome's theory. Bluebell was irritated to see that the table by his bedside was untidy. A half-empty cup with a crust round the edge of whatever liquid it had contained offended her. The bed had not been made that morning. As she made it, she promised herself a word with that housekeeper.

The doctor's person and manner did nothing to sustain her. He was a mild and ageing party with a habit of scratching with a vague forefinger the stretched muscles beside an open mouth, as if he were eternally trying to recall something of extreme importance he had unfortunately forgotten. He was nearly a newcomer to the house: the most recent of the Boys' chosen attendants. They had already nearly exhausted the faculty in Garvel in their search for the physician whose views would most pleasingly accord with their own theories of

health. This Dr. Cram had been portentously described to Bluebell by Ambrose as " a good man. Up to all the latest dodges."

" What do you think, then, doctor ? " she asked bluntly when she had steered him from the sickroom into the Library.

" I think he's rather bad, if you ask me," said Dr. Cram with candour, as if the question had surprisingly interrupted his secret search for that thing which ought to have been remembered.

" That's what I thought. And I think I ought to tell you, doctor, that my brother has been in the habit of using alcohol pretty freely. That may have a bearing . . ."

" But that's just what's worrying me, my dear lady ! " cried Dr. Cram, coming to the fullness of life. " I knew all about that. But in these cases . . . It's a puzzling business, really . . . Well, I suppose we can compensate for the intake. But I did think I saw, about his mouth, just a hint of the heliotrope cyanosis. And that's a bad sign, you know."

The heliotrope cyanosis. Lovely, terrible phrase, with all the sleek, remorseless hitting-power of the cobra in it ! The heliotrope cyanosis.

" Yes, but I wonder if he could still be moved from here ? " Bluebell persisted. " I don't live here, you know, and I have a sister very ill with the same trouble at my home in the city. There's only a housekeeper here. If it could possibly be arranged."

Dr. Cram scratched his cheek.

" Surely, surely ! " he said. " Better out of the way. Where's your telephone, Miss Oliphant ? Now, can I remember the numbers ? "

It was arranged. What could not be contrived in the sprawling and indifferent city was simple in the town where the name of the Oliphants could still command attention. A private room in the auxiliary hospital at Pennyfern ? An ambulance ? Certainly. Within the hour the stricken person of Tristram was swinging with the movements of the vehicle down the drive of his father's house.

" Good show, Bell ! " Jerome congratulated his sister. " The poor chap will be far better in hospital. You'll stay for lunch, of course."

" O, dear, no ! I've got my poor Rose Anne to look after. If I could have the car for the 12.20——"

" You'll surely have a glass of sherry and a biscuit at least," Ambrose protested. " You wouldn't hear about it, Bell, but I managed to pick up a parcel of a whacking fine Amontillado in Rollo's the other day. You will ? Good. I'll go and crack a fresh bottle, and we'll have a noggin all round after all that worry. It doesn't do to decant a good sherry," he added gravely. " Loses its character in a couple of days. You've no idea."

The heliotrope cyanosis. The alluring phrase haunted Bluebell all the way home ; she was still the innocent mesmerized by the

serpent's eyes. Her desire to reach Rose Anne's bedside and look into her face became nearly frantic. Rose Anne must be fought for every minute of the day and night. The saving of that dear life was a brilliantly exciting necessity. It was (when you were honest with yourself) wholly different from the case of poor Tristram, which was only sad and a little sordid.

Bell found in her own mind that she had already committed Tristram to the grave, and the discovery was a fresh shock. As she crossed the vast concourse of the Main to find a taxi she was oppressed by the sense of her own generation of the Oliphants beginning to peter out: the surviving men doomed to bachelor eccentricity and, whatever might happen to her two half-sisters, the proud name lost in the welter. As the antique cab banged and swung on its way westwards she wondered idly if, perchance, history would faintly remember her great-grandfather, Julius, the eminent ship-designer, and her grand-uncle, Walter, whose bones of a medical martyr lay in distant Istanboul.

Bridget was out on the steps to welcome her home, her eyes gleaming behind the steel-rimmed spectacles.

"She's better," she announced. "She had a good two hours' sleep this forenoon. You should have just seen her wolfing into an egg switch I made her!"

Bridget's manner suggested harmlessly that egg switches made by her own hands possessed unique curative virtues, and that if the case of Rose Anne were left entirely in her management the crisis would quickly pass off in spells of healing sleep.

"O good, Bridgie!" cried Bluebell. "She's not sleeping now!"

"No. And how's Master Tristram?"

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

"Poor soul!" said Bridget, but rather automatically. "Have you had your lunch? No. I thought not. That's why I've kept a nice chop for you in the oven."

Rose Anne did not look by any means the picture of returned health Bridget had suggested, but it was a joy for Bluebell, after what had seemed an interminable and shocking desertion, to find her alive, certainly no worse than she had been in that morning hour which now seemed to belong to another historical era altogether. She lingered over her kiss of greeting.

"Why inspect me like that?" the patient asked, a thought peevishly. "*Rigor mortis* hasn't set in yet. Or are you just looking for spots?"

Bluebell laughed. This was her old Rose Anne, the real one. What a relief! No trace at all of heliotrope on that pale face with the heavy eyes.

"Sorry, Rosie! I thought you might be asleep."

"I did sleep to-day. I even put down one of Bridgie's patent egg switches, just to please the old duck. I'm ashamed to say it, Bell, but I don't feel quite so hellish as I did this time last night. I thought I might try sitting up in the lounge this evening."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!"

Bluebell's voice vibrated with her profound sense of outrage. She did not know it, but as she grew older and responsibility piled on her shoulders, she was already prone to the middle-aged woman's unhappy trick of making her assertions of faith sound like gusts of anger. And the snake called heliotrope cyanosis was at her heels.

"You'll lie there until Dr. Stirling says you can move, and that will be a week yet at least. Such nonsense!"

"Old bitch!" observed Rose Anne, but mildly and affectionately. "How's brother Tristram?"

"Not at all well, I'm afraid."

"But dear Ambrose and dear Jerome will have it all arranged so that the least possible inconvenience to themselves will be avoided. That's a miserable lot of men. And you're just a fool, Bell, to go running round in circles because you can't bear the mess they make of their lives."

"Shut up!"

But Bell laughed again. This was Rose Anne coming to life in her best flaunting form. Nothing so sinister and reptilian as the heliotrope cyanosis could be active in such a presence.

"Can you try to sleep again, dear?" she asked. "I really must get down to the Tuckshop this afternoon and see that it hasn't gone bust. I'll be back by five at the latest."

"Off you go! Bridgie will probably want to read me nice bits out of the *Red Letter*. Poor old Bell!"

At four o'clock of that winter afternoon Bluebell's was packed. There they were as she had shrewdly and perhaps a little maliciously envisaged the results of her enterprise—the womenfolk of the suburban, provincial *bourgeoisie* crowding the place that had been deliberately designed to allure them: the tea-room that was the fashion of the hour; the tea-room that subtly flattered them with a scheme of decoration few among them could have safely chosen for themselves, with tables laid even more cleanly and correctly than a villa housewife could compass, with pretty girls in pretty uniforms who were more gracious than any girl living-in, with the home bakery there for all to see. It was as if Bell had shown the suburban housewife how she might live, had she but the wit to deploy her means correctly. Bluebell's was no more than the average suburban pretension in its most exalted form. It triumphed precisely because it deliberately

supplied that little margin of polish and expensiveness the suburban ladies liked to think exclusive.

"We had Lady Olive Carment in for lunch," boasted the manageress, Mrs. Burns, the widow of a man killed on the Somme. "She said she enjoyed it thoroughly, and that she'll be back."

"Good!" said Bluebell absently.

There they were, the suburban ladies by the score. They wore fur coats of varying degrees of expensiveness, and absurd hats. They chattered wildly, perhaps dangerously; sometimes you thought they were screeching like budgerigars. They were just a pack of breeders and ex-breeders out on the skite. Most of them looked more ludicrous, and talked much more idiocy, than they would ever know. They were sheep. They were obeying blindly the dictate of a mass illusion . . . "Bluebell's is *awfully* good. You simply *must*, dear" . . . They had never been frightened by such a phrase as that deadly one about the heliotrope cyanosis. In bulk they stank, the unguents and powders and perfumes only overlaying and complicating the animal smells.

And yet, surveying her customers with a highly personal distaste, Bluebell knew that if she were to faint or be overtaken by pain or run down by a tramcar in the street, those sisters of her would forget their fur coats and dash to help her with cries of "The poor soul!" or "Here! I'll manage this . . ." For most women were fools indeed, but almost all women had the gift of kindness. They needed it always; and it was rarely that they did not also give it.

"By the way," Mrs. Burns brought her back to the present, "I got rid of that red-headed girl in the kitchen. Just a right trouble-maker. We weren't an hour started this morning but she had them all by the ears, and Mrs. Peattie threatening to walk out. So," added the little woman defiantly, "I just gave her her books and her pay and sent her packing."

"Quite right," Bell agreed.

"And that reminds me," the manageress went on, though the sequence was hardly obvious, "there's been a young man ringing you off and on. He seems terrible anxious to speak to you, and would you ring . . . Mallig, one-double six?"

"A young man? But that's the Miller's Barn. What on earth——"

Shortly she was speaking along thirty miles of wire to the owner of a voice just half-remembered: a young man's clear, confident voice with a sweet little hint of the Highlands in its intonations.

"That you, Miss Oliphant? This is Roderick Bell. Do you remember me?"

Did she remember the bright baby in the cradle years and years ago, the first time she saw the inside of the old schoolhouse at Maambeg!

"Roderick! Are you on leave? It's nice to hear your voice."

"My ship's in Liverpool, but I was wired for. Mother's very bad with 'flu. That's why I have been ringing. She is desperately anxious to see you."

"O, dear! Where is she?"

"She was up at the old schoolhouse when I got home this morning. Father's taking it pretty badly, and—— Anyhow, I got her into Miss Dickie's nursing home this afternoon."

"Good!" Thank Heaven for at least one clear-headed young man of energy! "Now——"

"She's really bad, I'm afraid," the young voice pleaded, "and she really seems to want to see you urgently. I wonder——"

"How can I get down now? I've got a case of 'flu at home: my sister Rose Anne. Just a minute."

The intelligent Mrs. Burns put the local time-table, open at the right place, under her nose.

"Here we are, Roderick. If everything's all right at home I could catch the 5.14 from the Cross. That would get me down at five past six."

"O, good! That's grand! She'll be happy. I'll meet you with a car. Thank you ever so much, Miss Oliphant."

More telephoning: the convenience that was a curse; and Bridget always turned garrulous on the 'phone. Of course, Rose Anne was doing fine; and the tone suggested that she could hardly do anything else in such competent and loving hands. Rose Anne was actually at the stage of what Bridget called "giving me some of her old sauce" and asking for her sketch-book and pencils. Bridget enlarged also on the exquisite delicacy with which she proposed to steam for the patient "as nice a bit of sole as ever you saw; and my, Bell! You should just have heard me giving it to that squinty-eyed manager in the fishmonger's. Him trying to get past me—me!—with an old haddie that would have cooked like cotton-wool!"

"O, aye! You think you'll manage back by ten? That's fine. I'll have something nice in the oven for you. And it's poor Mrs. Bell, is it? It's a pity of a nice, decent woman like her. My, Bell, you would think you were a district nurse, the way you have to go tearing after folk that's no' well!"

More train journeys: in the dark now, and this time along the northern shores of River and Firth. Life did keep flinging things at you! Now, at the end of a long day, in a cold carriage she shared with an elderly gentleman who smoked a strong cigar and incessantly hawked phlegm from his throat with a screeching bark and alarming wheezes, Bluebell felt small and very tired. Even the exciting image of the heliotrope cyanosis had somehow lost its brightness of terror.

Living was a weariness : a dull battering by drab realities. It was depressing that Betty Stirling, of all the self-possessed people in the world, should be reduced to calling for her help and company.

She had forgotten even to buy an evening paper. There was steam over the sooty filth on the carriage windows. Rubbing a clear space on the glass with her coat-sleeve, she could see only the winking lights of the buoys that marked the ship-channel and the malancholy, oily, sinister flow of an ebb-tide over the riparian mud. Warm light from the windows of working-class homes in the shipbuilding towns mocked the loneliness.

Roderick Bell was tall and dark and courteous under the sickly lights of incandescent gas-lamps in the terminal station, but only the adumbration of a living, interesting man. In the darkness of the car he was a pleasant voice, a youthful charm, and a handsome, dark-eyebrowed face in the recurrent flashes of street-lighting. The tiled entrance-hall of the nursing home might have been, after so much darkness, the lobby of a monastery in Tibet.

Betty Bell looked a small and unimportant object under the clothes on the single bed. Her skin was hot, her dark eyes bright. She struggled to sit up, but Bluebell gently held her down to the pillow.

"Lie quiet," she said. "You can't take risks with this business. I've got Rose Anne on my hands already."

"No, I'm pretty ill, I know. The heart's gone out of me somehow. So tired!" The sick woman appeared to confide in her pillow. "God bless you for coming, dear! You're the only person who can help."

"We mustn't get excited, Betty."

"I'm not excited. I want to ask you one or two things in case—I want you to promise me."

"What?"

"Give me your hand, Bell dear. I'm so lonely and foolish now. Ah! . . . Listen. If I have to go it will nearly break my poor Calum. He and I were made like that. And if this is the end of it, will you promise to keep my poor old Barn going and see that Calum has an income to live on?"

"I would do that, of course. But, Betty——"

"Let me finish, dear. I'm worried about the boats. They're to be returned from war service in the next few weeks, and I'm desperately afraid, if anything happens to me, that Calum won't have the heart to carry on, even for Roderick's sake. But if you would go in with them, if you would just keep at them, to get the *Princess's* going on the Firth again, then I'd be happier."

"What a strange thought, Betty! I'd be useless."

"You wouldn't. It's a queer thing, Bell, but women like you and

me are needed now and again. We're odd fish, goodness knows, but we seem to pop up just when our men-folk have lost heart . . . I'd hate to see the boats going. They're the finest thing I ever had to do with."

A wave of vivacity had come over her as she spoke and she raised herself on one elbow, but Bell put her gently back under the covers.

"Roderick could manage," Bluebell suggested.

"Roderick's a fine boy, but he's like his father. It's the Highland in them. They are not interested in money and what it will do, the way you and I have learned to be. They are just sailors, sailors born."

"They might be worse," murmured Bluebell. "And now, dear, we've got to think of getting you better and out at your work again."

When Roderick had driven her back to the station, however, and sat with her in the carriage until the train should start, she found herself moved to give a candid answer to his sudden, blunt question.

"I don't think she's well at all, Roderick."

"No, I thought not," he agreed morosely.

"But you'll let me know. Ring me first thing to-morrow. I'll come down at any time if my sister isn't any worse."

"It's a dreadful time for us all," said the boy.

A man bustled into the compartment with all the appearance of last-minute urgency as Roderick got out. He sat down in the corner opposite Bluebell: seemingly a very ordinary man of the business sort, in early middle-age, quietly dressed in clothes of good quality. But as the train gathered speed she saw through half-closed but wary eyes that his look, from behind his evening paper, was surveying her person in the manner every woman comes to know so well—the calculating eyes on the feet, the hungry eyes lingering on the ankles, the lascivious eyes following the lines of thigh and hips. She suddenly opened hers to challenge his look at her face.

"It's cold to-night," was his bold and cheerful opening gambit.

Bell curtly agreed and closed her eyes again.

"Wouldn't be surprised if there was fog in Town."

"Wouldn't you?"

The rebuff silenced her companion for a minute or two, but he was bold in gallantry.

"Care to have a look at the evening paper?"

"I've seen it, thanks," Bell lied.

She waited for the now inevitable move. It came when, as the slow train puffed out of the next station, she heard the soft click of a metal hasp opening.

"At least, you'll have a cigarette with me?"

"I will not," said Bell, adding in a sudden flash of anger, "unless you wish me to pull the communication cord."

She moved to a seat in the far corner. The gallant desisted and took cover behind his newspaper. At the next station he got out, slamming the door and leaving the window down.

It was the perfect end, Bluebell reflected sourly, to a day that seemed to have lasted too long and held too much of movement and worry . . . What was that silly song everybody was humming? When you come to the end of an oompy-ump, by Carrie Something Bond? . . . Carrie should try coping with a group of relatives and friends in the grip of an influenza epidemic. But, no! That was unfair. What was the sentimental cadence now. "And the dear friends have to part." O, damn all sentimental superstition, but it could get through the weak, soft places. Now, in this empty railway compartment, hurtling blindly through thickening fog by the river, she felt cold and empty and exhausted, suddenly tempted to decide, after those exciting months of making a new home and creating a business, that her wonderful world was built on brash feminine illusions, and that the real old world was at the same time going to pieces under her feet.

The fog that had gathered under the station roof and picked up the sulphurous exhalations of railway traffic bit at her throat. In the tram going home, with almost everybody coughing and the tweed-capped men of that industrial society spitting, she thought that the Spanish 'flu must surely get her now.

4

Bluebell stood alone by Tristram's grave, high on the windy hill above Garvel. She had laid her own little posy of daffodils at the foot of it, clear of the heavy wreaths that were now blowsy and rusting on the unsettled turf after a fortnight, and her reverie was profound.

Her pilgrimage and the small oblation of spring flowers were expressions of a wholly personal piety. Indeed, she thought it strange how free she was from any sentimental sense of grief for Tristram in death. She was just sorry that his life had been a failure and a waste; but she was his only sister, and she could decently pray for him. It had been a necessity, as soon as she had fought her own way out of a brief bout with the 'flu, to come down here alone with her small symbol of remembrance and, as it were, formally close the chapter.

She had been spared the funeral. It faintly amused her to think that Ambrose and Jerome had had to contrive that ceremony on their own account. The solemnity and importance of the affair had greatly gratified them, however. They actually came in state together to call at Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, ostensibly to enquire after their

sister's health and to discuss some family matters arising out of Tristram's death, but it seemed to Bell and Rose Anne, rather maliciously discussing the visit afterwards, that they were more eager to describe the enormity of the crisis through which they had lived and the splendour of the compliment paid to the family's position by the huge and representative turn-out of mourners. They had somehow managed, extraordinary men ! to arrange naval honours for Tristram, and Bell remembered with a little quiver of shame, their announcement in the *Herald* of his death " of illness contracted on Active Service."

She scanned the inscription on the headstone, the names and dates of Papa's first two wives and then his own, and she felt empty to think of the littleness of life as against the enormity of time. Tristram's brief legend would be added shortly, and then . . . With a last look at the grave and her own bunch of daffodils she turned away from morbidity and, as she marched down the hill among the clumps of evergreens and weeping willows and between the rows of gravestones in granite and marble and peeling sandstone, decided that for herself there would be none of this rotting redolence, none of this squalid, swiftly-forgotten pomp, but a clean burning of ashes and a complete forgetting.

She made her way through a part of the town only vaguely familiar and seen before mainly in glimpses through the windows of the Napier. It was a region of Early Victorian villas, once the homes of local fashion and now sub-divided and given over to the indigent respectable, the grass in the little front gardens all worn to mud by the feet of overcrowded children, the shrubs blackened by smoke and half-killed by industrial acids : a region of the pathetic tabernacles of Nonconformity in all its acrimonious denominations, the stonework of the sham and imitative Gothic walls and steeples peeling darkly like the bark of the trees. In all directions : uphill and downhill, eastwards and westwards, ran streets of intolerably uniform greyness, the tall Scottish tenements forming grey ravines in which, Bluebell felt, the human spirit must surely falter and decay.

Across a street bridge over a railway cutting between tunnels, the billows of smoke from those depths stinging her eyes and throat, she passed through a part of her native town she had never seen before—old tenements of the 18th Century with crow-stepped gables and wooden stairways utterly degenerated into slums ; small newsagents' shops, innumerable public houses, occasional pawnshops, cash butchers' raw booths serving the needs of the degraded poor ; an occasional school, with children chanting their lessons within windows adorned by tawdry statuettes of the Virgin Mary ; a distillery, an infirmary and a derelict sugarhouse.

Poverty stalked hereabouts in filth. All the women seemed to be

fat slatterns, hatless, shawled and unwashed. The men who lounged on the kerbs in greasy clothes looked hostile and sinister. Bluebell remembered Jack Alston and his concern about these things, also his cold lawyer's tale that the title-deeds of the foulest slum properties in Garvel showed most of them to belong to the richest families in the town, her own included.

At length, always moving downhill through that town eccentrically built on steep slopes, she came out on the waterfront where there were air and light at least, even if the warehouses and transit sheds confessed by their silence and shabbiness the decay of a port. Through droves of strutting pigeons she crossed the cobbled acre in front of the Customhouse, built in Corinthian grandeur a hundred years before to supervise such a volume of trade as never came that way. A man who limped down the long plinth of steps greeted her cheerfully.

"Hulla, Bell! What on earth are you doing here?"

"Hulla, Matt!" she responded warmly. "I haven't seen you for years."

It was Matt Mentiplay, a dancing partner at the Assemblies of the day before yesterday and a not impossible husband in the times when the ship-owning Mentiplays were as great and rich in Garvel as the Oliphants. Now poor Matt was, as the family fortune, broken and reduced. He had been a marvellously handsome boy, and now he was a parody of masculine beauty, for whereas one side of his face was as fine as ever, the other displayed a deep cleft in the temple, a staring glass eye and a burnt and withered cheek where, as with the inturned foot, the shards of his blazing tank had smitten him at Cambrai.

"But you're not going in for shipowning are you?" he chaffed her after they had exchanged their conventional news. "I heard you were in big business."

"Don't laugh, Matt, but I was actually thinking of it. I'm looking for the *Princess* boats, the Bell steamers, you remember."

"They're over in the Queen's. Just came in two days ago. I'll walk round with you."

The *Princess Alexandra* and the *Princess Louise* lay moored abreast, looking grim and aged. The battleship grey had somehow taken the old sweetness out of their lines, and their fortified bridges and upperworks added to a queer impression, as if greyhounds had been transformed into mastiffs. Nobody moved on their decks; the salt seas and the ardours of war had streaked and pocked their sides.

"The German bands won't be playing in these ships for a long time to come," observed Matt Mentiplay with kindly irony. "But they did miracles in the way of troop-transport to France; carried

hundreds of thousands each, regular as the clock. You know that Bell got his D.S.C. for ramming a Jerry sub—and he had fifteen hundred troops on board?"

"I know. It's Calum Bell I'm worried about. I'm one of his wife's executors, if you please, and she had a big share in the *Princess's*. Tell me, Matt—you're an expert—don't you think Calum Bell should be starting now to get these ships back into service on the Firth, in time for the summer trade?"

"H'm!"

Her friend cocked his head as if to study the ships through his good eye, and he tapped his chin.

"I wonder," he said. "Do you know, Bell, I don't think so. If I were your friend, or yourself as an executrix, I think I'd get all I could out of the Admiralty and then sell the ships for what they'll fetch—and you might get a fair good price, though these two worthies are getting old enough. But it's not just that. In our business we're beginning to see that shipping, especially coastal shipping in the first place, is going to come under all sorts of amalgamations and combines, and I honestly don't think there will be many pickings for the little man with just a few thousands capital and not an awful lot of big business experience."

She perceived acutely that Matt, though neither a subtle nor a highly intelligent person, spoke sadly but with the clear and fatalistic sense of the nearly-defeated. She and her old flame, standing side by side in accidental conjunction at the end of the Queen's Dock, were figures in the light of history: intruders from the stable past into the turbulent present and the incalculable future.

"I see," she said. "That's disappointing."

. . . It was more rational, however, than Calum Bell's way of putting it. She had had it out with Betty's husband in the old schoolhouse up the glen; and when she was going away, defeated, they had stood for a moment at the gate and she had made one last appeal to him to fight, if only for Roderick's sake.

"It's kind of you, Bell," he had said, shaking his head, "but that's all by with. I know she's down in the kirkyard at Kinlochmaam, but still"—and he waved an arm to indicate the wild wideness of the bowl of hills about them—"for me she's everywhere hereabouts, and it's a heartbreak every hour of the day to realize that she won't be coming home after all. No. The Garth Line folk have offered me a command, and a fine new ship, too, and I think I'll away out East for a spell."

Matt Mentiplay took his pipe from a pocket and started to fill it out of a pouch with a regimental crest on it.

"Disappointing's the word," he said slowly. "O, and that

reminds me, Bell! There's another old stager along here you'd like to see. Guess what."

He led her round the gable of a shed to an inner arm of the dock, and there lay in lonely state another ship in the battered grey of war service. Anybody who knew and loved ships would have recognized in her something of perdurable distinction, as of a great lady reduced to keeping a boarding-house.

"My poor old *Iolanthe*!" cried Bell, half-laughing and wanting to cry at the same time.

"Demobbed and up on the beach like the rest of us," observed Matt Mentiplay sourly. "But what a model! Look at those lines, Bell! They can't build 'em like that nowadays. There isn't the money, and there isn't the craftsmanship."

Bell thought of Mama and Papa and Uncle Eustace and wee Tommy Maclusky, and all who had once paced those decks in the days of ease and privilege. She also thought of Peter Manuel.

"And what happens now?" she asked.

"Scrap, I suppose. It's up to you and your brothers. You might get some profiteer to pay thousands for her. You'll get a few hundreds out of any shipbreaking firm—with a bit of luck."

"Hundreds?" repeated Bluebell quietly.

"Tens, twenties—anything you like," Matt replied impatiently. "Any old jumble sale price you can think of. She's only so much junk—now that we've won the war, or so they say. Land fit for heroes to live in and all that."

They walked back towards the Customhouse, talking casually of mutual friends and raising their voices frequently to compete with the clatter of Clydesdales' hooves and the iron-shod wheels of lorries on the cobbles of the dockside roadways. Their parting was as lacking in warmth as the easterly wind that, whipping about her legs, made Bluebell wish that she had worn a good fur coat.

"Well, I must get back to the office," said Matt Mentiplay.

"I'm just in good time to get the twelve-forty three at the Central," said Bluebell.

"It's been nice to see you, Bell."

"Nice to see you, Matt."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

They had once been nearly sweethearts. They held a lot of the past in almost secret understanding between them. It would not really be a bad idea, thought Bell as she made her way through the main streets of the lower town towards the station, if two good old friends could agree to live together in cordiality and comradeship, her own means and vigour offsetting his losses and sacrifice and

sufferings. She laughed at herself. It was just not a bad idea, an arrangement. Anyhow, the ghost of Jack Alston would always haunt the scene.

The Central was, as almost all provincial railway stations, some forty years out of date—cold, draughty, dirty, lavatory-smelling; with porters who disclaimed all knowledge of the running of trains and even seemed to disapprove of railway methods in general, and, in the newspaper kiosk, a snub-nosed girl to resent (no doubt in the bitterness of her solitary state, reflected Bluebell) the approach of all save flirtatious lamp-boys.

Bell walked the platform to its far end, acutely aware of the ambient shabbiness, of the grubbiness of the station itself, and of the drabness of the derelict warehouses and tenement buildings and irrelevant railway huts of red brick and corrugated iron that ringed it round. There was no order at all, no decency in the industrial scene, and those who had created it, or merely allowed it to occur, were criminals. It would have amused and cheered her to know that, some eighty years before, alighting from the first train to run from the city into this same station, her own great-grandmother, old Julius's half-French wife, had had some pungent things to say of railway travel in relation to civilized life.

She strolled back to the covered part of the station and suddenly noticed how loud it was with the roockety-cooing of pigeons on the girders. The clock above a plaque bearing the discreet legend GENTLEMEN in white letters on blue intimated that it was now thirty-eight minutes past noon on the British railways. Five to go. A small plaque hard by the clock and the lavatory offered the convenience of a PUBLIC TELEPHONE.

Bluebell hurried and fiddled with pennies in her handbag, and soon enough she was speaking again to Matt Mentiplay.

"Matt? This is Bell Oliphant. Don't ask questions. My train's just coming in. But about the old *Iolanthe*. Could you buy her for me?"

"Good God, Bell!"

"Shut up. I've got a daft idea I'd like to have her as a sort of house-boat or something. Moor her up one of the lochs. I'd hate to see her broken up."

"So should I. But——"

"I want you to buy her for me, Matt, if the price isn't too fantastic. It's to be a proper business deal, remember. Allow for your own commission, and once you've got a price ring me at Grove 1831. And listen. Matt . . . O, shut up and listen! Don't dare to tell Ambrose who's buying. I'll kill you if you do. It's just a client of yours. No. I haven't time to argue. There's my train."

Roderick Bell was with Rose Anne in the lounge at Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, when she reached home. She smiled when Bridget announced the fact in a precautionary whisper. Young Roderick had become an assiduous visitor at the flat during Rose Anne's convalescence. It was quite remarkable how often he had to be in the city to see his owners and thought that he would just drop in. Bell delighted in the flirtation. They were two young people very dear to her, and what an enactment of poetic justice their union would be! Often she found herself planning how she would arrange to set them up in life together. It was silly and bossy, but she liked thinking of these things. Order was everything . . . or was it just nearly everything, and not quite?

"Hullo, children!" she greeted them.

They sat close together on the chesterfield, the fair head and the dark bent over a quarto volume of Bateman cartoons.

"And where have you been, my pretty maid?" Rose asked casually, while Roderick rose with the gawky courtesy of youth.

"I've been almost a-shipowning, sir, she said," Bell returned facetiously. "In fact, down at Garvel to inspect some of your property, Roddy. The two *Princess's*; and very nice they looked for all the grey paint and the battering they've had. I still wish you and your father would think again and start them up on the Firth this summer or next."

"Not I!" laughed Roderick, dismissing a triviality. "I'm a deep-water man. In fact, I've got orders to rejoin my ship, and I'm catching the 3.45 for Liverpool."

"Don't tempt her, Roddy," said Rose Anne, "or she'll go and buy them herself; and what with the Tuckshop and two boats and the Miller's Barn, the woman will land up in a padded cell. You didn't buy a steam laundry by any chance, Bell?"

"No. But I did buy a ship. At least, I think I did."

The young people laughed. Rose Anne tapped a temple.

"Tell us, Bell," she said. "Now that we have been warned, I think I can face it. Are your strong arms ready, Roddy, in case I swoon? I think I did read in the *Herald* that the *Aquitania* was in for a re-fit."

"Blue flag close up!" piped Mr. Roderick Bell.

"You're a couple of brats," cried Bell, delighted. "But it was only the old *Iolanthe*."

"Good Heavens, woman! Why?"

"Well, she'll be broken up otherwise, and I thought——" Bluebell faltered. "O, I just thought we could use her as a sort of house-boat or something! Moor her up one of the lochs. Week-ends and that sort of thing."

She knew that she deceived herself. Her bid for the *Iolanthe* was a reaching for the sense of continuity in living.

"Bell Oliphant," said her half-sister, "you're very nearly the most unskilful liar I have ever met; and that's saying a lot, when you consider the case of our dear brother Ambrose . . ."

"But it's really a good idea, Rose," young Roderick came earnestly to Bell's rescue. "I reckon the *Iolanthe*'s one of the loveliest models still afloat. It would be a shame if she were scrapped. She'll make a dashed nice home for a holiday, even if you couldn't get her running again. All you want is a good old watchman-steward. I believe I know the very man for you. You'd need a good boat for ferry-work. One of those new outboard motors would do the trick. I'd get her dry-docked, Miss Oliphant, and——"

"And reconstructed by John Brown's and Harland & Wolff in collaboration," said Rose Anne flippantly. "Costumes by Worth. Cigarettes by Abdulla."

They all laughed happily, and Bluebell held out her hand to Betty Stirling's son.

"Well, if you won't take on the *Princess's*, Roddy, good-bye and good luck all the same. You'll come and see us whenever you are at home? A meal and a bed any time . . . I'm dashing off to the Tuck-shop now, Rose. Back about six with a bit of luck."

When she got back, her half-sisters were dancing to the gramophone. Rose Anne had cleared the lounge in a characteristic act of indifference to disorder and its consequences and was instructing an enchanted child in the new arts of the fox-trot and the two-step. The machine was giving forth the tune called *Swanee*.

Rose Anne's face was flushed and bright above the darker head of the intent child. Bluebell saw that she was enjoying herself as much as the infant. Indeed, the daughter of Kate Hercus was living with even more than the child's natural intensity in the joy of movement and rhythm. She was a sort of strong fairy, swinging Chris about, the subtle, eager movements of her slim, adult legs every bit as nervous as the small girl's earnest prancings.

"Well, you're having a time of it, you two!" said Bell, smiling at the open door.

"This kid's a demon to dance!" cried Rose Anne, still jigging to the music. "It's in her bones. Isn't it, sweetheart? You love every moment of it."

The child did not reply in words. She just went on dancing, as if she and Rose Anne had gallivanted into a dream-world all their own. Bell intervened gently.

"I think that's quite enough for you, Rosie. Remember what you've come through. If Dr. Stirling saw you! Chris, dear, go and

have your milk and biscuits with Bridgie. Then come back, and I'll read you a story till it's bath-time."

Chris sped gladly enough towards her milk and biscuits in the kitchen, and Rose Anne collapsed on to the chesterfield.

"What a child!" she cried. "Full of beans! And a feeling for rhythm that would knock Toscanini sideways."

"You shouldn't fool about like that, Rose Anne," said Bluebell. "You've just recovered from a horrible illness, and Chris gets her proper dancing lessons at school. Did Roderick get away in time?"

"Meaning: did he propose to me before he went? He didn't, dear, but he will the next time."

Bell knelt down to tidy the fireplace. She spoke quietly and rather shyly, as if communing with the coals.

"It was when I saw you and Chris dancing. The feeling of a household hopelessly female. Something wrong about it, as wrong as what's wrong with the Boys in that West Room of theirs. I don't want to spend my life bringing up a batch of discontented spinsters."

"There's yourself, my dear," said Rose Anne softly, and the girl's hand touched Bell's shoulder.

"Don't talk nonsense!"

"Are you so very different?" The voice was still gentle. "Just thirty, aren't you? You have looks, a figure, taste, brains, energy, a heart and, I suppose, a womb. Frankly, Bell, I don't see the point of this martyrdom, jolly as it is for Chris and me."

Bell rose to her feet.

"Well, I think we'd better go and have dinner," she said brusquely.

CHAPTER IX

THE RESTLESS YEARS

I

JOSIE BRUCH, the bright-eyed, excitable and flashily brilliant Jew-boy started the news buzzing through the School of Art.

He waited at the foot of the main stairway, agog to tell it again and again to all who would listen. Group after group formed about him; you could see his arms waving and his hands flashing within the ring of heads and backs, and hear the exotic accents he had brought with him when his father had forsaken the tailoring trade in Bethnal Green for a lucrative line in kosher catering on the South Side.

"I'm telling you the trut'. I got inside information. The unemployed ex-Servicemen are marching on the City Chambers. The slops are packed by the hundred in the quadrangle; I seen them when I passed in the tram. Bill Coltart seen a regiment of soldiers marching into the Alma Barracks late last night, tin 'elmets and all. Izzy Kramer and Dan Halloran are leadin' the unemployed, and you say there won't be trouble? O, no! There won't be no trouble. There'll only be bloody revolution, if you ask me."

Most of his fellow-students laughed, knowing their Josie, but when the bell went for morning classes some two score men and girls, idle or curious, lingered with him in the entrance hall, Rose Anne Oliphant among them. The fatal words were spoken by Janet Ogg Wemyss, an unhappy girl so plain and with legs so short and thick that it was her consequent fate to have to bid for prominence at unsuitable junctures.

"I vote we all go down to the Square."

"Yes, let's all go down to the Square! . . . Come on, lads and lassies! . . . I'm fed up with that pneumatic nude in the Life Class. . . . Forward, the School of Art! Into the Class War like men!"

They fought noisily to get through the swing-doors and tumbled down the outer steps on to the roadway. Janet Ogg Wemyss screaming with excitement, Josie Bruch addressed them from the lowest step.

"We got to do this proper," he announced earnestly. "If the unemployed can march in column, so can the School of Art. Sort yourselves out into fours abreast, men on the outside, the girls in the

middle. That's right. Izzy Kramer would be proud of us. Lead off, Bill."

Josie trotted forward to take the lead, the inevitable subaltern of a light-headed platoon. He turned his head to smile brightly at Janet Ogg Wemyss, marching ecstatically in the first file.

"It's a pity I didn't bring me piano-accordeon," he said. "We could 'ave 'ad a bit o' music."

They marched down the steep street gaily, for this was fun. Marching is a heady and a catching disease in the psychological order. Soon they were singing in unison a set of scandalous verses to the tune of *John Brown's Body*, the girls hardly knowing in their near-hysteria what vulgarities they uttered.

Where the residential street joined a tram-route a bulky Regular constable with a Special by his side halted them with a fat hand upheld.

"Where you lot going?" he asked.

"We're going a-rioting in the Square, kind sir, he said," retorted Josie Bruch brightly, to the ecstatic delight of Janet Ogg Wemyss.

"Away back to your learning, you lot of mugs," said the policeman unhelpfully.

"You can't stop us going to the Square," Josie asserted a brittle manner of leadership. "'Tain't the law."

"It's the law in this town, ye miserable wee runt o' a sheeny, that there's no processions except the magistrates say it. Ye're a procession, aren't ye? Well, ye'll break up, or by God! I'll break ye up wi' the toe of my boot."

The harsh logic of this statement impressed the Jewish mind, but Josie retained the Cockney wit to assert his leadership.

"All right, boys and girls!" he addressed his followers brightly. "Break up into two's and three's and get on. And let me propose an 'earty vote of thanks to Constable—— I didn't catch the nyme?"

"I'll catch ye . . ."

But the policeman was a slow and perhaps cautious mover, and the young people, linking arms in small mixed groups, laughed themselves away from his beat.

It was turning out to be wonderful fun. They paired off, and Janet Ogg Wemyss was watchful to seize Josie's arm. Rose Anne found hers held in the large paw of Big Bill Ledbetter, the Australian, who, they said at the School, was destined to be a great sculptor of faces and figures as magnificent as his own. Under the disapproving looks of those who find it difficult in the early forenoon to delight in the high-spirited exhibitionism of student bodies, the young people jigged in couples and trios through the busy streets, chanting the ditty that was their fancy of the hour:

Everybody ought to know
How to dance the Tickle-toe . . .

Then, as they came towards the Square down a steep side-street, even Janet Ogg Wemyss perceived that the great gathering of people there, covering acres of asphalted space about the statues, was in no mood of carnival. Even if most of them were spectators, these thousands were in sombre and apprehensive spirit under the low skies that threatened rain. Their silence was remarkable, ominous.

The walls of the tall buildings that made the Square threw back only the hum of the trams along one side and the cat-calls of a handful of hooligan youths, safe to be bold behind the row of heavy, long-coated policemen who, by sheer force of inertia, held the masses back from the pavement opposite the portico of the Municipal Buildings.

The crowd waited. The front of the house of authority was impassive, only a single policeman walking backwards and forwards before the doors. Those in the crowd who had climbed on to the plinths and even on to the pedestals of statues had nothing to report during those fateful minutes of waiting.

" No good trying to get a front seat at this show," said Big Bill confidentially to Rose Anne. " Let's cut across behind the crowd to the other side. We'll see the procession coming along Citizen Place."

They left the others of their group and, dodging among the hangers-on at the back of the crowd, circumventing statues of monarchs and poets, explorers and inventors, reached the other side of the square as the feeble squeal and thump of an amateur fife band announced the approach of the men with a grievance.

The procession was led by an officer of police on a lovely bay gelding. Scores of policemen on foot and in close file marched on both sides of the column, seeming to imprison the demonstrators.

Rose Anne saw only the men within the cordon, seeing them in the mass for the first time. No individual among them was physically remarkable as Bill Ledbetter was. They were rather small, broad-shouldered men in greasy suits, with long arms and short legs. Most had knitted scarves folded across their chests in place of collars and ties, and to a man they wore tweed caps with long skips that darkened their set, pale faces. They were weak in their poverty, and no doubt in the crudeness of their sentiments, but they were formidable in the strength of their grievance against society. Watching them pass, Rose Anne found herself frightened, distressed and puzzled by the complexities of the world as now revealed to her in a new aspect.

" You won't see anything from here, Rose Anne," said Bill when the head of the column was stopped short of the Municipal Buildings

and the procession halted. " You're not a Cornstalk like me. The fun will all be up in front. See ! if you climb on to the back of this seat, I'll hold you from behind."

Eagerly she jumped up to the seat and then on to the curved back-rest of one of the benches set beside a garden plot in which the daffodils of municipal enterprise were near to budding. It was pleasant to have Bill's great hands firm and kindly on her hip-bones, holding her steady. Afterwards, she remembered thinking how unfortunately the Cockney intonations of New South Wales contrasted with his physical splendour.

In the very moment of its arrival this thought was blasted from her mind by violence under her terrified eyes. It seemed to happen all at once, and it took her days to sort out from the blur the split-second sequence of events.

Her first impression was of a crash away near a far corner of the Square, where, in a steep side-street, a gang of youths had overturned a lorry laden with empty bottles. Then, in another corner, there was an angry clanging of a tram-driver's warning-bell and a livid flash as the trolley was pulled off the wires by an angry man. She saw figures in the portico of the Buildings, one in white wig and robes, a sheet of paper in his hand ; and she heard another thin explosion of glass and saw blood staining the white hairs of the wig.

At that the police came charging out of nowhere in a solid body, their batons upraised. They laid out to right and left where the head of the procession had turned the corner by the derelict tramcar. She could hear the knock of wood on bone.

" O ! O ! O ! " she wailed.

Her companion, watching the scene from a lower level but still with the advantage of his great height, matched her cry of distress with a shout of warning. Over the heads of the mob he saw that the onrush of the policemen had started a sudden backward movement of those who had come to watch, so that there was a surge of battling, suffocating, relentless mortals away from the scene of conflict, the terrible pressure of scared humanity sending those on the outer fringes of the crowd racing away in panic.

Women ran, screaming piercingly as if each was engaged alone in escaping through a jungle from one wild animal. Men ran faster and more purposefully, darkly determined to get out of danger and trouble. Many stumbled and fell, and handbags and bowler hats slithered along the asphalte, only to be kicked farther ahead or trampled by the hordes pelting up from behind.

" Out of this, quick ! " cried Bill, swinging Rose Anne down to the ground.

He seized her arm and ran her along. She stumbled to her knees.

A man dived headlong over her shoulders. A clot of panting humanity piled up behind the obstruction.

Big Bill lifted Rose Anne from the ground. By dint of main strength he battled athwart the crowd into the lee of an ornamental fountain. Rose Anne found herself sitting ludicrously in the dried up basin, her legs dangling over the edge. Bill's great body was intimately between her legs. Her face was pressed between his shoulder blades. With his elbows he fought off the eddies of frightened people that surged round the fountain.

Suddenly it was all quiet again in the Square. The panic was as brief, and as cruel, as the conflict in front had been. Now covering the whole enormous expanse of asphalte, hundreds of isolated persons stood looking back to see ambulance men propping up the injured and bandaging their heads. Ambulance wagons wheeled in stately procession from their prepared positions in side streets. The police officer on the bay gelding shepherded round a distant corner the tail-end of the procession of demonstrators, defeated in this preliminary engagement.

Bill Ledbetter lifted Rose Anne down from her strange perch and held her as she swayed for a moment or two.

"Feeling a bit dicky?" he asked with a grim smile.

"That was terrible, Bill, terrible!"

"It wasn't so hellish funny, was it?"

"Where are the others?"

"Does it matter? You can bet your bottom dollar Josie Bruch's half way home by now, allowing for stops at every lamp post to be sick. Come and have a cup of tea."

"Thank you, Bill. And O, thank you with all my heart for managing me in that horror! I'll never forget . . ."

"Come on, kid."

They got a table in a slightly shabby little tea room near the Exchange. When the waitress had at length brought their cups—a simple girl, horrified by what she had heard of the turmoil near at hand and willing to listen to the details for the rest of the day with cries of "O, my!" "Fancy!" and "It's a crying shame, that's what it is!"—Rose Anne found that she could not lift hers to her lips for the shaking of her hand. It returned to the saucer with a clatter, and she laughed foolishly.

"And I'm supposed to finish my beautiful silverpoint to day!"

"Better not try," said Bill kindly. "You go home and have a good lay down. I'll see you up in the tram."

"Not at all, Bill! It's not so bad as all that. Really! I can manage quite well now. Sorry to have been such a fool. And Bill," she said, laying her fingers on his broad, brown hand, "bless you again!"

She could manage, but it was only by dint of a fight against a part of herself that wanted to shy away from the realities of tram stops and street numbers and the change of a sixpence less a penny ha'penny. The conductor obviously thought she was drunk but kindly enquired where she wanted to get off.

"I'll see ye right, lady," he said, and that helped. As he handed her off at the corner of the Gardens he added paternally: "See you and go straight home, now. Just you try a good strong cup of tea and a wee sleep. So long!"

That was funny. That was the queer and rational solicitude of the Scottish working man for all those who, as it might have been himself, had stumbled by the wayside. She laughed as she walked along the terrace: and then she realized that the self she laughed at was a confused and frightened booby of enormous proportions—most of her whole self in this special moment of historic time.

One turned in at the entrance flanked by the spotted laurel in front of Dr. Risk Ramage's consulting room windows. One counted four steps up, then four steps across the bottom landing, then three flights of twelve steps each with two intervening landings. One was always one in these mechanical proceedings. One had gone through the ritual for—what was it?—nearly three years on end now. One was securely on the top of one's small world.

Ah! but one had forgotten to pick the Yale key in advance out of one's handbag. One had to search for it among a gape of compartments and a litter of coins, lipstick, powder puff, stubs of pencil and crayon, visiting cards, unused return tickets, snapshots, keys and newspaper cuttings. Then the front door suddenly opened on its own account, and one—or was it the real Rose Anne?—was staring vacantly into the face of Bell who, neat and decisive in brown tweeds, was about to set out for her day's work at the Tuckshop.

"Rose Anne!"

"O, Bell, Bell! A dreadful thing has happened!" she howled.

She was pulled inside and hurried through to the lounge, talking all the time, telling somebody all about a horror seen and realized in its crude novelty. She was still gabbling when her sister pressed her down among cushions.

"It must have been awful, darling," said Bell, but she was obviously thinking of something else. "Kick off those shoes. My dear, your feet are perishing! Your hands are cold. You're shivering."

"Yes, Bell. But the ugliness and terror of it all Those poor men with cheap, thin clothes and their hard, unhappy faces And even if they are stupid, must they be clubbed and bashed? It's all so brutal, so unnecessary. O, dear!"

"It's all very terrible, and it's all very difficult," said Bell, "but

we're not going to discuss it until you're feeling a good deal better. Lie quiet, now."

She went off to get Bridget to fill hot water bottles. She went to the medicine cupboard and exactly poured a measure of brown bromide into a little glass, diluting it carefully under the cold water tap. (How wise it had been of little Dr. Stirling to foresee Rose Anne's occasional but probable collapses.) She collected from the back of a chair in her own room a heavy travelling rug in the red Robertson tartan.

"Drink this. Now lie down properly. Here's a hot bag for your feet and one to cuddle. Bridgie will bring you a cup of soup if you want it. I've got to go out for an hour or two. Try to sleep, dear. If you don't, we'll just have to put you to bed."

As she went into the city on the top deck of the tram Bluebell knew that she had been brusque and repented of her impatience. That was her fate, it seemed, so far as poor Rose Anne was concerned. Rose Anne was very much what she, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, had made of her. The girl had never worked in a soup kitchen during the slump of 1908 or dealt with humanity in the mass in a popular restaurant; the girl, born to be a wire walker above the muddy cataracts of the ordinary life, had been protected, managed—or was it even spoiled? And was she not herself, through sheer excess of zeal, failing in precisely what she had set out to do when she had led her tribe of womenfolk out of bondage in Agincourt?

It was all very difficult. For a minute or two she was happy, thinking that she would make something tougher and freer than Rose Anne of little Chris. But when she saw the evening newspaper bills with their tidings of riot and injury and looked down on the clotted, incomprehensible seethe of humanity on the pavements of the shopping streets, her heart sank, and she knew that the tower she had unconsciously sought to build around a few female lives was already beginning to totter.

2

Rose Anne, the camel hair brush in her right hand poised in mid-air, ruefully considered the tubes in the palette box of water colours she held in her left. Anon she peered closely into the still wet washes on the paper set up on an easel before her. Then she looked beyond the easel, screwing up her eyes in the artist's concentrated effort to comprehend all the elements of complex landscape and sky in the final, just *coup d'oeil.*

"O, hell!" she said decisively but quite mildly. "Lost it again!"

She spoke mildly because hers was a holiday task and water colour

was not her medium. She could afford to play on this lazy July afternoon, daubing away with mild professional interest and yet with the indifference of the amateur to ultimate results. Tea would be ready soon. It was simply nice to be on holiday with Bell and Chris in Betty Stirling's old schoolhouse of Maambeg; it was positive bliss to be away from the newspaper office in which, a commercial artist of limited talent, she spent her days drawing young female figures with impossibly long legs in the latest of fashion's ever-changing models.

Rose Anne dipped her brush in water, mixed two tints afresh and, after another searching look at the woods and the Highland hillside she was attempting to compose in harmony, dashed at her sketch again. But she had missed the moment that is critical in the use of water colour, and her brush strokes were wilful, as if an accident might throw up the result she had been unable to produce by painting her best. Her attention wandered, her eye was caught by a figure on a bicycle that, bent low over handlebars of the racing type, toiled painfully against the slope rising from Inverquey.

It interested her, this figure, as symbolic of a tidal movement among the folk of the industrial world about her. It was Rose Anne's instinct to disregard such things in what she knew everybody called her airy-fairy way, but the fret of life in the newspaper office, enforced contact with the city masses, and earnest debates before the fire in the Press Club had made her rather tremulously aware of a crepitation, half-sullen, half-ebulliently hostile, among that dark, mysterious, uncountable mass of the workers.

She could still tremble at the memory of that morning of riot in the Square. She remembered other long, sombre processions of pale, determined men, carrying red banners with angry emblems on them and black coffins grimly symbolizing their fear of starvation. Now she could place in its significance the incidence of a Railway Strike, a Miners' Strike, and the recurrent disputes that stilled so often the rattle of rivetting-hammers in the shipyards they could hear, one of the city's significant overtones, even from Dunedin Terrace.

The cyclist dismounted at the Bannachra turn and, though the figure was still small in the distance, she discerned it to be precisely what she expected—a young man in khaki shorts as brief and wide as her own knickers, a short-sleeved khaki shirt open nearly to the midriff, rucked socks and light shoes. It was by now the uniform of an army of young men and women escaping in hordes from the crowded places into open country. Even the mop of sleek black hair that glinted in the sun was according to the new, plebeian convention. The legs were wiry and knotted from much pedalling, and Rose Anne could envisage the thin, cheap chain of silver that would almost

certainly hang about the young man's left wrist or neck, the badge of the new gypsies.

She continued to paint, but her eye kept measuring the approach of the lone cyclist ; and as he came near she saw that he was by no means the halflin youth of her fancy. This was a man not far short of thirty years of age ; the stigmata of maturity were in the modelling of the taut flesh over his high cheek bones and in the lines about the mouth and jaw of his dark face. A Celtic type, the artist's eye catalogued him swiftly, possibly Irish. And there was no thin chain of silver about his wrist.

He raised his head as he approached to stare at Rose Anne and her easel, as if astonished to find a grouping so sophisticated by the side of a mere track through the West Highland uplands. When he came abreast of where she sat he stopped and leaned on his machine, panting from the effort of the climb. Rose Anne turned to smile a mild greeting, and he smiled back.

" Hot," she suggested.

" Very. But it's grand up here," he replied. " Is that water colour you're using ? "

" Yes, but I'd have done better with pastel. Are you interested in pictures ? "

" Very much."

The stranger dropped his bicycle on the verge of the track and came to her side, bending near her to study her sketch. Rose Anne was at once acutely aware of their sexual difference, of the skimpiness of this man's clothing and the faint male exhalations from his heated body.

" It's pretty awful," she said awkwardly, blushing.

" I think it's good," said the stranger gravely. " What's wrong with it ? "

" Don't you see ? " she gladly hastened to escape from personal embarrassment into the detached province of art. " I've missed the whole point. Water colour is hit or miss, unless you've got the technique of a Turner. It's got to flow ; you've got to keep it fluid, moving," and she slashed at the board on the easel with a laden brush. " But this Scottish landscape would break your heart. Look at those cloud-shadows sweeping over that hillside. See how the light—and light is colour, you know—changes almost every minute. That's what you can't catch unless you are a first-rater. And I'm not."

" I see," said the dark cyclist. " That's very interesting."

Rose Anne ripped the sheet from the block and tore it in two.

" Here ! " the stranger protested, putting out a hand.

The little play was interrupted by a voice calling from the door of the schoolhouse.

"Rose Anne! Rose Anne!" it reached them melodiously, a homely little tune in major thirds.

"That's my sister calling me for tea."

The cyclist helped her to fold her traps and walked his bicycle by her side along the road. Bell came to meet them, slim, slight and trig in a cotton frock and still pretty, thought Rose Anne with loving pride, in her approach to middle-age.

"This gentleman and I have been discussing art," she explained lightly. "My sister, Miss Oliphant, Mr. . . . I'm afraid . . ."

"Shaw is the name. Fergus Shaw, if it matters. But I'll be getting along the road now."

Both women noted the edge in his phrasing, the faint undertone of hostility in his voice, but Bell was the one to sweep that sort of thing aside.

"A cup of tea, surely," she insisted briskly, but smiling. "Two women and a young girl living like tinkers! We are not on ceremony. And I know you want one."

"It is kind of you," said Fergus Shaw softly.

"You are a Highlander, surely? That intonation . . ."

"My father and mother were pure Highland, Gaelic-speaking folk from Knapdale way," he agreed; and then the truculence flashed again, "but I'm just a rat out of the slums, no class at all."

"And that," said Bell coolly, leading the way into the kitchen that was, in brightness and friendliness, as it was in Betty Stirling's day, "would never have occurred to me. This is our sister, Chris, home on holiday from school. Just take that seat beside her, will you? Try one of my scones."

Rose Anne watched. The grouping about the table was for a part of her an enchanting study in line and mass, in colour and chiarascuro, and she composed her picture and the palette for it in a delighted abstraction. Another part of her, however, studied the personality of the stranger. Her relentless eye observed his little awkwardnesses at the table, his anxiety to be genteel in what he considered genteel company. (He should have watched Chris wolf into the scones with a schoolgirl's appetite!) She was sorry for his nervousness when Bell produced a jar of preserved ginger and a long fork. Her sharp ears analyzed the quality of his speech: the speech of the people exalted by a care for clarity of meaning and pronunciation, perhaps by deliberate training in speaking: the Highland lilt working subtly through it all.

His face? Fairly handsome, certainly strong, even distinguished. (The thick dark brows above the faintly sullen eyes met above a long and slightly hooked nose.) The distinction came, she thought, out of something strong and fiery within Fergus Shaw: some inner warmth

of profound conviction that had its cheapest expression in his edginess as of one who, as she remembered an American phrase used by Roderick Bell after one of his voyages, carried a chip on his shoulder. Interesting? Ah, yes! a little too interesting for her complete peace of mind.

Bell managed the conversation, aided by the cheerful candour with which Bell's cherished plan of education seemed successfully to have endowed young Chris. It was the girl who set Fergus Shaw talking freely.

"But how on earth," she asked, "did you ever find your way up here? I've never seen a cyclist on this road before."

He smiled at her innocence and said:

"When you've nothing else to do with your life, young lady, you've plenty of time to explore."

"Nothing to do with your life!" cried Bell, raising her eyebrows.

Her tone indicated complete disbelief in the possibility of any man or woman being in such a deplorable condition.

"Nothing to do with your life, Miss Oliphant," repeated her guest gravely, raising his dark eyes to meet hers. "When you're a skilled worker and willing to work, and there's no work for you. When you've seen your young wife die in childbed of starvation, sheer starvation. When your diet for months on end is tea and fried bread, imported bacon at sixpence the pound and Polish eggs at sevenpence the dozen. When you've got nineteen shillings a week to live on out of the Dole after you've paid eight shillings of rent for a room-and-a-half in a slum. When you have to stay in your bed most of the winter to save coal. That's having nothing to do with your life, Miss Oliphant—except work politically to smash the system that suffers millions of folk to live that way. Live!"

He had started his speech quietly, but it ended on the forced, strident note of the demagogic convention. The Oliphant women, unused to such emphases, were politely silent for a moment. Rose Anne watched Bell's face and saw, what she expected to see, the twitching of the delicate nostrils that invariably indicated her sister's readiness for battle.

"To fight politically to smash the system," said Bell drily, "is surely to have something to do with your life, Mr. Shaw."

The stranger turned to her quickly, his look dark with annoyance and suspicion of irony, but when he met the gentle smile with which Bell could always meet righteous indignation he flushed a little and smiled with her.

"That's good," he said, tilting his head sideways. "That's a right debating point. You've got the real forensic mind."

"Bell can't be bothered with untidy statements, that's all," Rose

Anne explained. "She heard too many in her remote childhood, and now she's got to live with young Chris and me."

Everybody laughed, and Bell blushed. It was lovely to be able to make Bell blush, to conjure the prettiness through the mask of the efficient spinster.

"Rose Anne's just blethering, as usual," said Bell, but happily. "As for you, Mr. Shaw, I suspect you of having a good deal more training in debate than you pretend."

"Well, I've done my bit of spouting for the Party," replied the cyclist, gratified, "and half-an-hour on a soapbox at the dockyard gates learns you a thing or two. But the best I ever got was from the University. O, no! Just extra-mural classes—English literature, philosophy, economics. That was great! There'd be sixty of us in a class; every man on the Dole, every man a rebel, drinking it all in and thinking."

"O, good!" cried Bell. "Nothing to do with your life, indeed! This is fascinating. Tell us."

Fergus Shaw was at his ease now. His preoccupation with table manners and class distinction fell from him. Fortified by cup after cup of tea—Rose Anne counted seven—he sketched the outlines of a worker's life.

It was as if he needed this release; as if, Rose Anne shrewdly divined, the intellectual secretly despised the stupidity of his own people and found it easy to expand among the graces and intelligence of the social order he hated—and envied.

But his story was one of terror. The chance traveller revealed to these women of the industrial plutocracy a world they knew about in theory, like a lesson in geography dutifully learned, but of which they had never before glimpsed either the size or the darkness.

As he spoke, they had to adjust their minds to comprehend what seemed to them incredible conditions of domestic discomfort and the impossible meagreness of the money standards in the slums. They had to envisage a Highland lad, their guest's father, running away from the poverty of the crofting country towards the city and its fabled shipyards and then, as a journeyman plater, taking a Highland lass from a crofter-fisherman's cottage to share a room-and-kitchen in a dark riverside tenement on a wage that was good at 38s. a week. They had to imagine that simple pair rearing a family of four, and according to the fiercely decent traditions of their race, in a third-floor prison.

"When my wee brother Calum died the body lay on the kitchen dresser to make room for us on the floor. There was one W.C. to three families, and the cistern usually wasn't working."

"Intolerable!" cried Bell.

"Och! you'll read yards of that sort of stuff in any second-rate novel about the slums," Fergus Shaw dismissed her indignation. "But it's not the reading about it. It's the living it for year after year, from generation to generation. Of course it's intolerable, but capitalist society goes on tolerating it, and that's why some of us are out to smash the system. And we'll do it yet!"

He had waxed angry again, but Bell encouraged him with a nod and filled up his cup afresh.

"I'm not saying it's easy," the visitor allowed quietly. "The trouble is apathy among the folk that suffer most, the apathy put on them by years of hopelessness. Do you know, my old father was a right conservative to the end, proud of the yard and his job and the ships they put out, and when I took the political line he would have kicked me out the house if it hadn't been for my old mother. And even that was when she was keeping the house on six-and-six a week during one of the lock-outs. Ach, the workers are mugs! That was Union money, of course. There's more in the Dole, but it's only dope just the same."

"Starvation level," murmured Rose Anne unhappily.

"Aye, and a wee bit below it, miss But it's not just that, not just having no margin for leisure, let alone pleasure. It's the damnable, haunting insecurity of life even when you're working. It's boom-slump, boom-slump, in the shipbuilding industry till ye knock yer pan out with bitterness and despair." He relapsed into the vernacular in his vehemence. "If you've any brains, that is. If you haven't, you take to the booze or the Dogs."

"And the women?"

"God help the women any time!" Fergus Shaw said morosely. "If they're sluts, if they can't be bothered cooking and washing, if their bairns run naked and dirty, do you wonder? And if they fight to keep decent, they break their hearts and die young."

Rose Anne, troubled, rose from the table and walked to the window. From there she turned to challenge the guest.

"But surely your generalisations are too sweeping," she said, and in her nervousness she sounded angry. "Surely you are too bitter."

Fergus Shaw looked up at her sharply as if he, too, was angry, but he schooled himself to a clipped restraint.

"There are exceptions to every rule. There are degrees of experience and degrees of resistance to experience. I'm just telling you that what I say applies to the lives of ninety per cent of the working folk in this part of the world, and the working folk are eighty per cent of the total population. As for bitterness," he cried, his tone charged with the very quality, "I once had a young wife . . . But I'll pass even that, and I'll tell you that bitterness is all I have. Bitter-

ness is necessary to me. Bitterness keeps me going in the fight and fit for the battle that's coming—coming as sure as guns are iron."

It was his final challenge, and since there was none there competent to accept it, he took his victory with good grace and rose from the table.

"Come on, now," he said to Bell, "and I'll give you a hand with the washing up before I start along the road."

"Not a bit of it!" Bell protested. "Three idle women."

"I'm a dab hand at drying up," he teased her, and he started expertly to collect the tea things.

Soon enough he had Bell and Chris, at least, laughing over the story of an experience that seemed to them strange and wonderful. (Rose Anne, whose mind rose easily above the domestic duties, remained by the window, her eyes on the crimson and gold of the wallflowers still blooming in the little patch of front garden, but her thoughts racing.) Fergus Shaw held a bunch of spoons in his left hand in the proper professional manner and dried them off in a jiffy.

"Where did you learn that trick?" asked Bell sharply, emptying the basin in which she had done the washing.

"Where was it now?" he replied absently. "O, aye! Torquay. I worked a month in the kitchen of one of those swanky hotels."

"But, Torquay!" Chris protested.

"O, that was after the first Hunger March, away back in '22."

"Hunger March!" Chris was eager for information. "What was that? It sounds awful."

"But it wasn't. It was the best fun I've had in my life," Fergus Shaw laughed reminiscently. "Two thousand of us, mostly ex-Service chaps, all the way from Scotland to London. Not one of us caring a docken what happened, just out to make a demonstration. Marching along, singing the old hobo songs, *Hallelujah! I'm a bum* and all the rest. My, but the English officials were fed up with us before we got to London! Them and their poor law institutions! They couldn't get us out early enough in the morning. All the way down by Carlisle, Whitehaven, Barrow, Manchester, Rugby . . ."

"That must have been wonderful!" cried Chris innocently.

"Yes, it was. Wonderful!" the stranger agreed wistfully. He turned to Bell gravely: "The wonderful thing was that the common folk were with us all the way. They gave us money to carry on. The women ran out of their houses with tea and bread and fags. They were with us. And that's what made me believe, at last, in the solidarity of the working classes."

"Yes, but you haven't told us about Torquay," Chris persisted.

"O, that!" laughed Fergus Shaw. "As a matter of fact, when we got to London, I got fed up with the hunger marchers and the

politicians, and I just lit out on a bike for the wide open spaces. To tell you the truth, I pinched it outside a pub in yon place—what do you call it?—Barnes and pedalled away. It was easy."

"And you found freedom," suggested Bell quietly.

"Yes, individually. The best four months of my life. It's wonderful how you get on when you're a lone wolf. I'd work a bit now and again to collect some dough—that's why I stayed in Torquay—then on again when I took the notion. The places I slept in; the things I pinched—eggs and hens and apples and pears, aye, and once a shirt off a clothes' line! That was in Ludlow. But I saw England and a lot of grand country. Down to Land's End and back, up through the fruit country into Wales, all round the Lake District. . . . Then my old father died, and I had to come home."

"Your mother is still alive?"

"Yes, but there's only her and me now. And it's high time, by the way, I was getting up the road to make her her supper. Thanks for the tea, and I've enjoyed the talk. It's been a real break."

The Oliphant girls, the daughters of three different mothers and yet a group of women closely knit in sentiment, interest and even looks—those infallibly distinguished looks of all the Oliphants—went with Fergus Shaw to the gate to see him off.

"Well, that has been a pleasant break in spinster lives, Mr. Shaw," Bell said. "Will you come and see us in Town? There's so much to talk about. We'll be at Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, from next Friday. There's usually a party of sorts on Saturday and Sunday evenings. We'll be delighted."

Fergus Shaw frowned and flushed angrily.

"I'm not going to be an exhibit at any party," he said. "Prize specimen of the working class intellectual nicely tamed."

"In my house," replied Bell, sweet but sub-acid, "the guests are not encouraged to posture for each other's benefit. We rather prefer them to come just for the sake of talking and exchanging ideas."

"Sorry!"

Fergus Shaw did not enjoy receiving the snub, but he accepted it, after a brief struggle with his own tender pride, easily enough. His strong, white teeth showed in a smile.

"Well, you know what I am—the enemy of your sort. I know who you are, of course. But it's been a nice afternoon, just the same."

He shook hands formally with his three hostesses, mounted his bicycle with a muscular flash of lean, bare leg and, with a parting wave of an upraised arm, shot away down the hill, a plume of dust rising under his wheels from the loose surface of the track.

"Well," laughed Bell, looking down the road after the rapidly

dwindling figure. "That's a real person, if you please! I feel as if I had been in the middle of a thunderstorm for the last three hours."

"At least, he can laugh at himself," said Rose Anne.

Her casual manner was the automatic concealment of an inner disturbance. The coming, the presence, the history and the going of Fergus Shaw had upset her in ways she would not dare to analyze. It was for the moment an upset as physical as the onset of a chill, as distressing psychologically as a fright in the dark.

"I'm going for a walk," she announced abruptly and walked away from her sisters in the direction from which the lone cyclist had come to watch her at her work.

Chris caught Bell's eye and tapped the side of her head to indicate a schoolgirl's diagnosis of Rose Anne's chronic condition of eccentricity, but Bell acknowledged the gesture with only a faint smile and, before she turned indoors, stood gazing at the slim figure that had so abruptly walked away from—what?

3

Mounting the stairs towards the door of Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, late on a Saturday evening, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant suddenly concluded that she was getting on in years.

This came on her with a finality much more decisive than any mere momentary reaction to physical weariness could have been. Tired she was; but it was more than fatigue which made the ascent seem quite an effort, which made her halt at one of the barred landing windows to stare across to the Gardens under the slow gloaming of the northern autumn night, and which held her there for a while, listening with detachment and a faint distaste to the noises that filtered from the lounge of her house through the hall and down the entrance stairs to where she stood alone, thinking of time and its passing and bracing herself after a long day of work and worry and decision to become one of a party of younger and more talkative people.

What a day it had been! What a life she led! Now there were three great Bluebell restaurants in the city, and there was always Betty Stirling's old place at Mallig; and it seemed that, on this September Saturday, everything must go wrong everywhere at once—precious cooks threatening to strike at critical moments, waitresses by the score in the tantrums with that epidemic hysteria which is the curse of female labour otherwise so willing, whosesalers tardy and difficult, transport vehicles breaking down and, to complete the symphony of worries, the hordes of an industrial region more clamant

than ever, apparently, for food and service on this, their Autumn Holiday.

One of those days. It never rains but it pours. But the phrases could not comfort Bell. The crude physical fact of hot, aching feet, as if their soles had been over one of her own grills for an hour, cruelly reminded her that she had that day walked at least ten miles of carpeted or tiled passage and driven seventy miles at least in the little car she had been forced to acquire, a domestic crisis at every turn.

How did it go, now? From the original Bluebell's in the city, after a tiff with the new manageress, to the latest of the Bluebell's on the South Side, where the girls were in a pet over—if you please!—a selvedge of carpet which, curling up, interrupted the swing of the service doors to the still-room. (Another row with a manageress who couldn't make obvious decisions on her own responsibility.) Then an appeal by telephone, chasing her from pillar to post, from the excellent woman at the Miller's Barn, who threatened to collapse under the influx of excursionists.

Decisions here, improvisations there; and no subaltern to make a sensible, independent move to deal with the obvious. Was she herself, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, such a fearsome creature, such an intolerant dictator, that those under her could not act? Perhaps. That wanted thinking about. But she paid them so well. The old *Iolanthe*, lying in the loch, had become a sort of convalescent home for the reviving invalids of the Bluebell organisation. The pension list of the firm was already long, absurdly generous in places.

But there was the point. Too much money all round. Too much money out of every cup of tea—a huge gross profit on every pound of tea brewed in Bluebell's urns at hundreds of cups to the pound. Money! And it was from the sense of money that she had suffered all her life. Money, her sheer power to make it in a silly world, accounted for the noises of revelry that now came down to her, where she stood on the chilly landing, from the great, warm room in her own house.

The lounge seemed crowded with people when she entered it; its atmosphere was abominably fouled by cigarette smoke and the fumes of alcohol. One or two young men, almost strangers to Bell, rose to acknowledge her arrival, but that was a detail unnoticed by most of the dozen young males and females who filled the available chairs or even sprawled on the hearthrug. Most of them were engaged, in two's or three's, in earnest and violent debate. Phrases detached themselves from the babble and sounded silly in her ears.

"But I'm telling you, man, Epstein's always a bit of a showman. Of course he's a good sculptor, but he's a stunt-merchant just the same."

"Now, if you compare it with Eliot's *The Waste Land* . . ."

"What about the Sitwell's?"

"What the hell's the use of asking rhetorical questions?"

"I wouldn't listen to a Plebiscite Programme if you paid me for it. The 5th Symphony, the *Coppellia* Suite . . . Christ! I'd give them a bellyful of Bartok."

"Language, Charles."

"Of course the General Strike was not a successful revolution, for the good reason that it wasn't directed by revolutionaries." (This was Fergus Shaw in full flight.) "It was a clear case of earnest and elderly Trade Union leaders, flogged into action by one man with guts, Arthur Cook, trying to use the Big Stick and then finding that their dear old Liberal principles didn't give them the strength to bring it down on the nuts of either the bosses or the workers."

"Absh'lute nonsh'," said the fat and drunken reporter from the *Advertiser* to whom these earnest remarks were addressed, hiccupping.

Art, literature, music and politics—these were being discussed as she had ideally wished, but Bluebell, hungry and tired and sober, wondered a little bitterly if the Saturday nights at Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, were not becoming just a little too popular. She wondered sourly if those heavily argumentative Scots would so crowd the lounge of her flat if she had only tea to offer them.

With extreme distaste she saw that a young and pretty girl she did not know at all, clearly the worse of drink and displaying an undue length of silk-sheathed leg, was being adventurously fondled in the bay of the front window, her silly head lolling along the ledge, by a youth who had first come to the flat as an earnest lecturer in economics in tow of Fergus Shaw. The fat reporter from the *Advertiser*, snub-nosed and bespectacled, had just come for free drinks and was now simply drunk.

Did they think that this was a pub? Or that she was prepared to see her lounge turned into another West Room? Rose Anne was so uncritical about these things; she would ask anybody along and tell them airily to bring their friends. In her swift revolt from the scene Bell decided on discipline. The Oliphants would not be at home next Saturday to the girl in the bay of the window. There would be no spirits available next Saturday, only beer. Then they would see.

One of the few men who had risen at her entrance was Roderick Bell. He was a fine, calm figure of a young man matured by responsibility and now Captain Roderick Bell, if you please, of the Green Star cargo liner *Mount Everest*, unloading frozen meat in the King's Dock. He pleased Bell. He was her friend's son, the heir of her calm good looks, and he had sense.

"Sorry, Miss Oliphant!" he apologized hastily. "Take this seat."

"No thanks, Roddy. I'm just going into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. I've been out all day, and it seems horribly fuggy and noisy in here. Carry on."

Eagerly enough he resumed his place on the settee beside Chris. Ah! there it was. Chris at nineteen was also frank and sensible, and pretty enough too, darker and more vivacious than her half-sisters. That at least had been one job fairly well done so far, the education of Chris to a normality no other Oliphant had enjoyed since the days of the formidable, legendary great-grandmother, Barbara Rait, wife to old Julius. Now it was so natural, so pleasing to all the sentiments, that Roddy Bell was attracted to her; and what of the years between them? It was also so delightfully, ironically amusing that he had returned from his voyagings in the first place to woo Rose Anne and, finding her indifferent, her mind fixed elsewhere, had slipped with a sailor's natural simplicity into a much more suitable attachment.

Always that problem of Rose Anne: the vexed, complicated, adorable mysterious one . . . Bell studied her as she sat back from the rest of the party under a standard lamp. There was a sketching-block on her knees and her eyes were intent on the dark, enthusiastic face of Fergus Shaw as, wasting his time and his brains, he argued the case of the People against the drunken reporter from the *Advertiser*.

A strange, awkward business, this passionate interest of the sensitive child of the plutocracy in the vehement politician of the proletariat, but for Bell a fact was always a fact, ineluctable, unarguable. She could lose sleep wondering what precisely was between these two, wondering still more painfully how Rose Anne's absorption in Fergus Shaw would develop and end, but she knew this to be one problem beyond her shrewdness and authority. And Fergus Shaw was a man, a friend of her own.

She was violently distracted from her reverie by a shout from the corner of the room behind her.

"Hold that, Fergus!" cried a rough voice peremptorily. "Don't budge your head an inch till I get that line right, with the firelight down the angle of your jaw. O lovely, lovely! And you, Chris, keep your chin up till I get that throat of yours right. O boy! O boy! You're a bonnie kid, and that's the God's truth! And am I no' a bonnie artist?"

Everybody laughed, even Bell: everybody that is, except the fat and drunken reporter. The strange young man with the strange name of Tod Zuill was at once a butt, a favourite and a mystery. Bell saw him now as the artist furious in activity. He also was bent over a block of paper, but his attack on it was comically ferocious as he slashed away in coloured chalks with the bravado of inspired certainty.

His back curved over the task, his lean, sallow, hook-nosed face expressed the utter selflessness of the artist in his rapture.

"Is it good, Tod?" asked Fergus Shaw, quietly ironical by the fireside but faithful in holding the pose.

"Good? God love me, it's terrific! O boy, O boy! This'll build up to a lovely composition. Come here, Rose Anne, and look at this. Is that no' great?"

Everybody laughed again and went on talking: everybody except Bell and the rapt couple in the embrasure of the window. The reporter, his plump body filling the best armchair by the fire, spoke portentously.

"Communishm," he said. "Wha' about it? Where wash't in General Strike? No good. Wash out."

Then Fergus Shaw's voice at its most reasonable and its iciest.

"In one breath you ask me two rhetorical questions and make one categorical statement, the latter cancelling out the former. Why argue, Galloway, if your mind's in such a muddle?"

"Why waste your own time arguing, Fergus?" came a surprising interruption from young Chris.

"Fair enough, Chris!" laughed Fergus.

"Absh'lute nonsh'," concluded Mr. Galloway, poking the wet butt of an unlit cigarette about the base of his nostril in a vain search for his mouth. "Abso-bloody-bolshie nonsh'!"

"Mr. Galloway."

Bell's voice cracked through the thick, warm air of the room. It so surprised the person named that a glass in his hand dropped with a smash on the fireplace tiles. Absurdly he stared at the empty hand as if puzzled to know by what sort of black magic he had been so suddenly deprived of a precious possession.

"I really think that will do," said Bell.

Fergus Shaw raised his dark eyebrows in enquiry, and she nodded.

"I'll see him home," he muttered. "Come on, Galloway. It's time you were home."

"Not time. Mind your own dam' bish'."

"Come along, now."

Fergus put a hand under Galloway's arm, but the fat man tried to shake it away and with his stocky legs sought to brace himself back in the chair against this outrage on his dignity.

"Take handsh off me!" he squealed. "Blas' Bolshie!"

Mr. Galloway lashed out with podgy, feckless fists but did not observe that another threat to the sanctity of his person had rapidly developed. Roddy Bell, using a dexterous grip, had pinioned his left arm and was most painfully forcing him to stand upright.

"You're going out of here, and quick!" announced this new tyrant grimly. "Come on, Shaw, get him by the wrist. Now!"

The women stared at this alarming but entrancing display of male violence, and there was a hush on the party as Mr. Galloway was vehemently run out of Bell's lounge, her house, her life and so out of this record.

Roddy came back, smiling and straightening his tie.

" Sorry, Miss Oliphant, but that's the only way to deal with that sort of cargo. Shaw's seeing him home. Now I must get back to my ship."

" Thanks, Roddy. You'll be looking in some night next week ? "

" Chris and Rose Anne are coming to tea in the ship on Tuesday. Won't you make up the party ? "

" That would be nice. I'll try. In any case, come back here for dinner. I want to talk to you."

Mr. Galloway's demonstration had at least the effect of breaking up a party that seemed to Bell in her weariness and irritation a hideous parody of all parties. She wished they would all go and stay away till she could get her house and its atmosphere and her mind cleared up again.

The girl who had used the shining hour to be petted in the bay of the window gushed over her farewells.

" Thanks a lot, Miss Oliphant ! It was *awfully* nice. I've enjoyed every minute of it. You give *lovely* parties."

" So glad you enjoyed yourself," said Bell at her driest and most formal, leaving the poor girl wondering on what sort of iceberg her barque of romance had so suddenly grounded.

At last the lounge was nearly empty. Its air was hot and reeking with animal and chemical emanations. The neat whisky that Mr. Galloway had dropped along with a shower of cut crystal shards stank like a vomit in the fireplace. The powder with which the petted girl had refurbished her prettiness, the operation conducted in the public view to the alcoholic delight of the economist, had left a brothel air about the place. Cigarette stubs had been ground into the carpet here and there and left to burn holes. The politer members of the company had done that which Bell abominated—dropped their cigarette ends into the heel-taps of their whisky, beer or sherry. She had been so careful to see to it that the room should be amply provided with wide ashtrays of good glass. But they did not care. There was in these people no sense of the order she worshipped.

She threw up the windows. Again she looked round distastefully at the litter of ash and empty glasses and thought of the work that faced the women of the house on the Sunday morning. She started automatically to gather the glasses on a service table by the door. Rose Anne and Chris were waltzing silently to a subdued tune from the wireless cabinet. Tod Zuill remained in a world of his own,

bent over his sketch, his subtle hand touching up his work, his head tilting backwards and sideways.

"I think you girls might give me a hand with the clearing up. And you, Tod, are you staying here to-night?"

"Uh-huh! If it's okay by you?" said the artist absently.

"Certainly."

This was another of the problems. Tod Zuill was really a sort of waif, born obscurely in a Lanarkshire mining village. Nobody seemed to know how he had drifted into the School of Art or how he maintained himself there, but they all said that he was a genius. One wet night about a year before Rose Anne—in Rose Anne's inveterate way—had brought home a shabby, dripping scarecrow with bright appealing eyes, indicating that this was something the Oliphants should feed and shelter; and Tod Zuill had stayed off and on ever since.

Now and again he would disappear, perhaps for weeks on end, and then come back looking as if he had been through the foulest stews of a seaport city. Now and again he sold a picture to a dealer watchful for appreciating talent, but Bell supposed that Rose Anne kept him in pocket-money—and what was money?? Somehow this natural had acquired a prescriptive right to a room in the attics with a bed-settee and a north light and was now as easily, casually at home in Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, as if he had been born their brother. For Bell he was an innocent of acknowledged gifts, and it was necessary for her to protect and encourage the gifted; but in this post-prandial moment, soured and humiliated by the affair of Mr. Galloway, she looked at her fledgling and uncomfortably wondered how the problem he represented was ever to be solved.

"I'm going into the kitchen to see Bridget," she announced curtly. "Clear up as much as you can, girls, and then bed. It's nearly midnight. You too, Tod."

"Aye, I mustn't miss the Bible Class," retorted the artist facetiously, still intent on his task.

Bridget sat alone before the kitchen stove, her steel-rimmed spectacles on her nose, the *People's Friend* in her hand. She did not rise to greet her mistress.

"Well, that's that," said Bell.

"Aye, there was a rare noise in there to-night," observed Bridget.

"A fool of a man who had to be put out and will be kept out from now on."

"Mphm!"

Bell was immediately aware of a coolness on the part of her old friend. Bridget's manner and tone were unmistakably cool and critical, if not positively hostile. The failure to rise from the chair

was little enough; Bridget was old and privileged; but it was decidedly one facet of an attitude new and disturbing. Bell put on the kettle for herself.

"I doubt you'll be having trouble with Hannah in the morning," said Bridget. "She's talking of giving you her notice."

"O dear!"

"She's a bit strait-laced is Hannah."

"I know," Bell agreed unhappily but immediately added with spirit: "But if Hannah thinks she is free to criticize the way I run my house, then the sooner she goes the better."

"You'd better tell her that yourself."

"I will."

These were the sure signs of battle lowering. Bell, now long experienced in the ticklish art of being a female employer of female labour, saw with a sickening clarity that the most intimate of her authorities, and one of the most cherished of her trusts, was about to break down in the old way of feeble, fallible humanity.

"It's not just these parties," Bridget resumed. "It's that Mr. Zuill. Really, Bell! That room of his is a fair pigstye, and I don't wonder at Hannah objecting to clearing up after him. It's not just that he's untidy. Most menfolk would break your heart. But that man's just dirty."

"He is my guest," said Bell, cold but unhappy. "However . . ."

She measured out the tea from the caddy into an earthenware pot and set it to infuse on the top of the stove. Bridget spoke again.

"I'm thinking myself I'm mebbe getting a bit old for service. I'll be sixty-four come Martinmas. My sister lost her man last hay-harvest, and we had a bit of a notion we might share the cottage at Queenshields, the cottage we were born in. A body wants a bit rest."

"Yes, Bridget. You deserve it. I did think . . . Well, we've been a long time together . . . But we'll talk about that in the morning."

She carried her tea-cup into the now deserted drawing-room. The draughts of night air through the open windows somehow accentuated the sourness with which the atmosphere had been impregnated. She looked round, a line of verse haunting the back of her mind—what was it? Thomas Moore . . . a banquet-hall deserted. Another phrase jostled this bleak simile—one of Fergus Shaw's phrases, about the rich topdog making of the domestic underdog the most hopeless sort of snob of all.

O, but it was wearisome, puzzling, difficult; and all the money in the universe could not buy an easy way through the jungle! As she switched out the lights she had the unhappy sense of her world in the 30's of the 20th Century disintegrating about her in a shabby confusion of drink and infidelity and irresponsibility.

4

Chris sat under the standard lamp, her pretty head bent over a piece of needlework, and Bell watched her with affectionate amusement. This was her little sister, immensely self-conscious of the ring that gleamed on the third finger of her left hand, gravely engaged in the traditional task of filling the bottom drawer; and it was so characteristic of a healthy young girl in love, thought Bell, smiling to herself, that one of her first works should be the creation of a frivolous, unsubstantial and intimate garment in crepe-de-chine.

She envied the child her happiness, but she took a faintly grim satisfaction in the thought that, when it came to the serious business of sheets and pillow-cases and blankets, table linen and towels and cutlery, she, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, would have the first and last word. If only poor Rose Anne—Rose Anne not growing any younger, as they said, sensitive, reticent, a little feckless in living; Rose Anne silent and sulky behind a book on the other side of the fireplace—could have in her love only a fractional share of Chris's happiness!

Chris was to become in due course Mrs. Roderick Bell. There was a poetic justice in that conjunction, but Bell had no illusions as to any high romance in the transaction. After all, she had planned and spent for nearly fifteen years to make and keep young Chris as normal as possible, as if the curse of the last of the Oliphants was abnormality. She had thought, lost sleep, striven and given much money just so that Chris might not be too subtle and troubled; and now it appeared that there was a sort of Pyrrhic victory to be claimed. Chris was clean, straight, kind, cheerful, as planned; and so was Roderick Bell. They would, within any possible calculation, be happy together. They would have children; and Bell, examining herself, laughed to think that she might be regarded as a sort of stock-breeder who had planned a covey of nephews and nieces for the brightening of her own old age.

"What's the joke?" asked Chris.

"Nothing."

"O, I wish we were back in Spain!" sighed the girl at a tangent. "Where are those photos again?"

She lifted a yellow packet from the table beside her and took from it a sheaf of glossy prints. She had the air of one who, not for the first time, relives a splendid experience through the magic of photography.

"O Lord! Are you going through them all again?" groaned

Rose Anne from behind her book. "You've been doing nothing else since lunch-time."

"But they're lovely, Rose Anne!" protested Chris innocently. "Look, Bell! Isn't Rose Anne lovely in that one? That was at Sitges, on the sands below that casino-thingummyjig. Fancy us bathing on Hallowe'en! And that's you, Bell, on the seat under the palm-tree. Where was that, now? O yes, Barcelona, down by that funny cathedral with the squiggly doors. Golly, what a place! Do you remember the racket through the night, bells ringing and motor-cars tooting—and the bootblacks—and the little miniature plants on the stalls in the Ramblas? They're ripping photographs, Rose."

"Any fool can take a decent snapshot in Mediterranean sunlight," said the voice from behind the book, pettishly.

"I wish we had some here," sighed Chris. "Just look at it!"

Bell rose and went to the window, nervously unhappy over Rose Anne's ill temper and Chris's innocence of either its existence or its cause, and the aspect of the outer world did nothing to cheer her.

It was still nominally light at four of a November afternoon, but a dirty yellow fog had closed over the city, and the trees in the Gardens were mere emanations of darkness within the seemingly solid vapours; the railings on the other side of the street were discernible and no more. It looked an empty and bitterly cold world outside her own protective sheet of the finest plate glass, and the sudden, brief tolling of a bell was a fearful thing to her.

They were clearing the Gardens for the night. A stranger might have wondered who could possibly be abroad in them on such an evening, but Bell knew that more than a score of the forgotten men would soon be shuffling through the gates and along the terrace, single, hushed, black figures in worn overcoats or shabby waterproofs, tweed caps, burst boots and the crossed mufflers they wore in place of the collars and ties of their pride: the unemployed, the men on the dole.

They were mainly middle-aged men, who came to the Gardens every morning and sat all day in the listlessness of undernourishment on the benches of the hothouses, negatively grateful for the artificial warmth that kept the community's collection of rare plants in life: orchids blooming sensually behind the greasy caps of the men who, on occasions of sentiment, were described as the finest craftsmen in the world and, in the bad times, were kept barely alive, while the children born to their wives must quite likely die.

It was the problem Fergus Shaw had been throwing at her for years now. It was such a problem as Bell could not evade, but its magnitude had come to baffle her.

The whole city was one occupied by the army of the workless. They roamed the fashionable shopping streets, finding a vague interest in windows still richly stocked with goods for the well-to-do. They stood in dark knots at the corners of their shabby streets, shadowed by the tall tenement houses. They stood in long, slow queues leading to the doors of what they called the Buroo. Now and again they demonstrated, especially the young ones, but among the masses of them there was neither strength nor spirit left to fight against the apparently ineluctable workings of a system nobody seemed to understand; just as Bell, worrying in her position of security and more, had to see that, with all the will in the world to give largely out of her means, the action of the individual must be negligible. And Fergus Shaw had snarled at her occasional suggestions of acts of charity.

The last of the miserables passed into the gathering darkness, and Bell returned to the fire.

"I think we might have tea," she suggested.

"Is anybody coming in to-night?" asked Chris idly.

"I don't think so."

"It's a long time since we had a party," said Chris. "I haven't seen Fergus Shaw for weeks."

Chris winced to a sharp kick on her ankle in its sheer silk covering. She glanced enquiringly at Bell and then turned to see Rose Anne rise, throw down her book on the floor and almost run from the room, slamming the door behind her.

"But what's wrong?"

"You young fool!" Bell blazed at her. "Don't you realize that Fergus is unemployed and is having a bad time, and that he's too proud to come near us?"

"O dear! Poor Fergus, and poor Rose!" cried Chris. "But surely we can help him?"

"If you can tell me how to do it," said Bell harshly.

She sat after tea in the empty dining-room, papers spread out before her on the polished mahogany. Bell had had to take reading-glasses, and the horn-rimmed spectacles gave her a comical schoolmarmish air which, in the happy days, had the invariable effect of sending Rose Anne and Chris into fits of the giggles. Now a frown added to the effect of prim maturity, for these were the final accounts of Bluebell's (Caterers) Ltd. for the financial year ended September 30th, and the managing director of that company had never succeeded in mastering completely the science of bookkeeping. A Profit and Loss Account was within her compass, but a Balance Sheet—no. She relied, rather, on the series of coloured graphs her chartered accountant always prepared for her: the pictorial illuminating for

her at a glance those dark places of finance that were only the more deeply obscured by masses of figures and ciphers.

Here was one that always enchanted her, one that had to be studied with exquisite care—the analysis of costs in percentages. Bell took almost a child's delight in this row of columns, squat or tall, in blue and red and green and yellow and purple and black, each intersected or surmounted by a dotted line that indicated the corresponding figure for the previous year.

The diagram was for her a living thing, almost like a picture in the cinema ; it was the very pulse of the business under her fingers. Red was for Rent and Taxes—up on last year because rates continued to rise in a depressed industrial area. Blue for Wages—another rise as usual. (She heard the disapproving click of her accountant's tongue and his invariable murmur " Too high, too high ! ") Foodstuffs in Green were down, the prices falling, as Bell clearly understood, through lack of purchasing power among the workers. Lighting and heating, appropriately Yellow, were up, the prices of gas and electricity tending to rise with the municipal rates. Repairs and renewals . . .

She turned to a sheet that was the especial pride of her adviser, Mr. Walter Scott Robin Burns, C.A. (" And no relation of either, I assure you ! " was his great joke. He was a mild, precise man with rimless spectacles who reminded Bell pleasantly of Jack Alston.) This was a document on a roll of tracing paper so lengthy that she had to hold down its end with ashtrays from the mantelpiece. It showed two thick lines approximately parallel, one bright purple, one bright green, and it had an almost artistic effect in that the lines rose and fell like the silhouette of a mountain range above the level base which, prosaically marked at regular intervals with figures from 1919 onwards, covered the trading span of Bluebell's (Caterers) Ltd. for nearly a dozen years.

Bell could hear the voice of Mr. Burns, at once reverential and ecstatic, expounding the virtues of this, his masterpiece. His dentures had the absurd trick of clicking at every one of his emphases of a point.

" Now this is a very beautiful graph. This not only shows the general trends of your company's trading over a long period ; it also affords us a clear picture of the fluctuations of trade in general over that period in a typical industrial area. Let me explain." And *click* went the plates of his false teeth.

" The upper line, in purple, represents to the nearest hundred pounds the gross receipts of the restaurants and what we might call the ancillary catering branches. The lower line, in green, stands for the net profits of the business as a whole. As you see, the lines run

nearly parallel—with one most interesting variation, to which I shall call your attention later on. The rough parallelism of the lines, of course, demonstrates clearly enough the general truth of the Law of Supply and Demand. Up, Down—Up, Down." *Click.*

(At this stage Bell had wanted to giggle, as Rose Anne assuredly would have done, but she disciplined herself to look interested and important.)

"Very well," Mr. Burns had proceeded. "We can read into the fluctuations of the curves two general tendencies: one seasonal, the other (if I may coin a phrase) cyclical.

"Take the curve for one year as measured along the base-line. See! A tendency to rise towards the end of the year, then a tendency to fall during the late months of winter; a rise again during the months of spring; another fall during the summer; and then the process starts all over again with the rise towards Christmas.

"No mystery about all that, really. People buy towards Christmas and the New Year, then they tend to save afterwards. They buy again in the spring—probably a psychological phenomenon—and ease off in the summer when, in fact, so many of the well-to-do are out of town on holiday. This odd little lump in the early autumn months is the exception that proves the general rule. That, Miss Oliphant, is in graphic form the influx of women shoppers buying school outfits for their children: the sort of social movement that is reflected with particular clarity in the trading returns of a good-class restaurant." *Click.*

"But this is fascinating, Mr. Burns!" Bell had protested sincerely.

"Yes!" the honest man had appreciated the compliment. "But look now at the larger implications of the curves. Ignore the seasonal fluctuations within each year and see how the general line of the curve rises and falls. Observe the bold, steep rise from 1919 to 1923"—(The point of Mr. Burns's propelling pencil had described an ecstatic flourish over this phase of the diagram)—"and that tells as clearly as possible the tale of the post-war boom in shipbuilding along with the successful launching and the novelty of your catering business. You follow me? But now observe the sharp downward trend towards the end of 1923 and throughout 1924, followed by two or three years in which the gross profits, however, stable and satisfactory in relation to costs, are at a relatively low level. And that, Miss Oliphant, was one of the recurrent periods of depression in our staple industries; you will recall the hunger marches and demonstrations of the unemployed. It's not all too difficult for you, is it?"

"No," Bell had agreed miserably.

She understood it all perfectly in relation to the human reality Fergus Shaw had brought into the lives of the Oliphant girls. Bell

could have put a fine pencil point over the precise place on a declining curve at which he—wheeling a bicycle, edgy, but bold after free adventure—had come up the hill-road from Inverquey to Maambeg.

"The rest is easy, then!" Mr. Burns had triumphantly declared with another *click*. "A rise again from 1926 onwards, following the failure of the General Strike, along with a temporary recovery of confidence in international finance. More work and more wages in industry; therefore more trade for Bluebell's (Caterers) Ltd."

The man was right. His theorem worked with damnable precision. It was within this period that Fergus Shaw had at last gone back to his trade in Pagan's and, on stable wages, had been able to lift his old mother out of a near-slum house in a riverside tenement and set her up in one of the new Council houses out Sandybanks way. She remembered going over the economies of the move with him.

What were the figures now? Rent at £7 15s. the quarter and a monthly instalment of £1 19s. 8d. on the hire-purchase of new furniture. Somehow she could always remember figures, but in this case it was perhaps because their smallness had appalled her. It took the best part of £600 a year to run Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, spending money apart. And what had the running of Agincourt involved in the great days of Papa's ebullience? She remembered sums running into four numbers.

"And yet," Bell had murmured, as if to herself, "our dividend remains very much the same, whether times are bad or good?"

"Precisely!" Mr. Burns had triumphed with still another *click*, taking off his spectacles to wipe them with a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Because, as I say, the *costs* of the larger sort of business tend to rise and fall with the fluctuation of trade. My graph makes that perfectly clear. And in the case of an adverse balance—purely hypothetical in this instance—you are protected by Reserves. If you will glance at the Balance Sheet . . . Very well! Take it that you have something to come and go on. You might, facetiously, call it a cushion, this accumulated fund of resources. And that, Miss Oliphant, is the meaning of Capital."

That was the meaning of Capital. Capital, whatever else it might be, was the wide, inert margin between security and insecurity. Such as the Oliphants lived securely within that moat; such as Fergus Shaw lived by the million without, unprotected save by, at the best, the Dole, the occupation of a Council house and the perilous ownership of a few sticks of furniture on the instalment system. Bell reflected that a discussion between Mr. Burns and Fergus Shaw would be bitterly diverting.

"But now, Miss Oliphant," the actuary had resumed gravely, "we approach a point at which costs continue to rise, while gross

takings continue to fall. That's a bad sign. Look how the purple curve and the green curve have tended to come closer and closer together during the past eighteen months. Ah, yes! Trade is bad. The shipyards are closing down one by one. Some will never start up again. But you see from my graph that the old Law of Supply and Demand is not operating! The two lines, purple and green, are tending to converge, perhaps even to cross."

"And what does that mean, Mr. Burns?"

"Ah, who knows?" Mr. Burns had replied oracularly. "Quite probably, I think, a financial crisis. That has already afflicted the United States as we know; it is difficult to see how it can be avoided here. Perhaps towards the autumn of next year, at a guess . . . It is a fascinating subject of speculation. Fascinating!"

Fascinating. She thought of the ghoulish detachment of the word as, on the following Monday afternoon, the nose of her little car tentatively explored the uniform, man-planned avenues, drives and crescents of the Corporation housing estate at Sandybanks.

This was a new sort of world she had never envisaged before, and it pleased her even at a late hour of the day when frost and industrial fog had wiped the colours out of the universe. She could see that, on fair days, the roofs in red tiles or blue slates, the tough little privet hedges and the tidy patches of front garden must make a pleasant show. Even if those terraces and semi-detached blocks wore a uniformly flat-faced, boxlike aspect, there was that about the arrangement of space between the harled walls which pleased Bell's sense of fitness and order. She perceived in the settlement, the size of a county town, with its own shops and banks and schools and hospitals, a communal job well done, and for a minute or two she wondered if a bid for entry into local government might not be an approach to a solution of her own problem of responsibility.

Number Nine, Glenfruin Oval, when she found it at length, was one of a block of flats on two storeys, and as she approached the narrow green door up a concreted path she saw that it bore, as compared with its neighbours, the signs of neglect. The strip of garden before its windows was unkempt; the plots were overgrown with weeds, the grass was yellow and knotted in its aboriginal coarseness, as distinct from the delved brown earth of rose-plots and the healthy green of the lawn on the other side of the common path. Buff linen blinds, mottled and torn at the edges, had been pulled down in the front room, and between them and the panes short casement curtains in butter muslin, ill-cut and dirty, hung from a sagging length of hemp twine.

The electric bell within the house rang to her pressure on the metal button, but nothing stirred in answer. Bell had the horrible

feeling of disturbing a house of death when she raised the knocker on the door and rapped a summons through an internal emptiness. This, however, had the effect of opening the neighbouring door and producing on the mutual doorstep a stout, rosy-cheeked woman of middle-age with the suds of a recent washing still shining on her strong, bare, red forearms.

"Ye're wastin' yer time," she said in the forthright Scots way. "The auld wife's in her bed to save the coals, and she'll no' answer the door. The young man's oot for the day."

"Has he got a job, then?" Bell asked eagerly.

"A job!" cried the neighbour sardonically. "Whaur wid a man get a job these days? Nut him! He's peddlin' soap the noo, door-to-door, ye ken, and it must be a fair heartbreak. He wis at the firewood for a while, and daein' weel, but they got on to him at the Buroo, and the polis nabbed him for liftin' auld sleepers from the lye doon by the Canal Basin. Ye'd think they had mair to dae than chase a young chap that's only tryin' to help hissel'."

"You would," Bell agreed. "But these are bad times."

"Aye, they're bad!" the woman insisted. "I'm yin o' the lucky ones masel'. Ma man's in the Corporation Gas—nae big wages, but steady. There's a lot roon' here that's juist hingin' on by the skin o' their teeth, after scartin' and slavin' for years to get into a Cooncil hoose. I'm tellin' ye, miss," the stout party said gravely, "it's juist pride that keeps the most o' them goin'. They'd sell the shirts aff their backs afore they'll give in. Him next door"—and she nodded towards Fergus Shaw's home—"he's fair gettin' it in the neck. He disny ken it, but I've seen me up in the middle o' the night wi' yin o' the weans seeck or something, and I've seen him wi' a barrow he's borrowed aff Jock Ballantyne, wheelin' a bit o' stuff away doon the road."

"You mean—pawning it, or selling it?"

"It's no' for me to say," asserted the neighbour virtuously. "Maist o' their stuff's on the sweet-bye-and-bye, if ye get me. I'll just bet ye a bob there's hardly a stick left in the place."

"Dreadful! Dreadful!"

Bell felt foolish, mean and empty. She had the acute consciousness of being an alien interloper in a world she did not understand, but which she had, by the sheer force of inertia, helped to create.

"Well, it seems to be no good," she tried to dissemble.

"Will I tell him who was asking for him?" the stout woman eagerly asked.

"O, no! Please—no, no! He would be offended."

"You're tellin' me!" laughed the neighbour, accepting the rebuff in good part. "I've seen me sendin' yin o' the weans through

with a bowl of soup when we could spare it and nearly gettin' the good meat back in ma face. O, he's a lad that! Proud! Ye'd think he wis the Prince of Wales!"

Bell withdrew to the driving-seat of her car and sat there for a while, wondering what she should do or, more precisely, what she could do and ought to do. She had not come into this remote and alien world to gratify herself by the performance of a fine act as Lady Bountiful, but now she saw that that was exactly how Fergus Shaw, the chip always on his shoulder, must in his distress regard her. Against that her firm sense placed the facts of starvation, friendship and love, that weakness of the heart which was turning Rose Anne into a shrewish melancholic.

For Bell these issues were such as Mr. Burns approached through his precious graphs. She struck a balance; she decided that she must stay and have it out with Fergus Shaw, if she had to hang about till midnight to catch him. The first thing was to move the car from in front of his house and park it at a point from which she could watch the gate. It would be a blessing on this cold and darkling evening to have the warmth of the engine under her feet again.

She started up the Oval on bottom gear and found that it was, as the name might have informed her, a loop that would return her to the point from which she had started, but just as she was rounding the curve at its highest point she saw him.

She stopped with a jerk of brakes and gear-lever and jumped out, leaving the vehicle in the middle of the road, a door hanging open. He had been climbing the slope towards her and had turned sharply in his tracks at the sight of her, but he turned back to face her and her cry of "Fergus! Fergus!"

An old tweed cap with a long skip was pulled far down over his dark eyes. A khaki muffler was crossed under his chin between the lapels of a stained and worn raincoat. He carried in his left hand a dented attache case in cheap fibre. His face was sallow, and he had not shaved for two days at least.

"I was trying to dodge you. I saw you talking to that inquisitive old bitch next door. Can you not forget it, for the Lord's sake!"

"No, Fergus, I can't. We were good friends, and I still think friendship has obligations—on both sides. Can't I help you?"

"You can't help the millions in the same boat with me. You'll not get me ratting on my own class."

"That's the last thing I'd ask you to do, and you know it. You're denying me the first privilege of friendship just the same."

"This is bigger than friendship."

Bell suddenly realized that they were arguing, speaking sharply and quickly, preposterously carrying on a political debate in the

gathering darkness in a remote suburban street. She sought to change the temper of their encounter.

" No. I didn't think of offering you money, Fergus," she said gently. " That is too easy ! But why, O why, stay away from us ? Why freeze yourself out in this stubborn way."

His dark eyes avoided hers and looked past her.

" My mother's too old and done. I have to stay with her," he said. Then he burst out again into bitterness. " I'm down and out. For God's sake leave me alone ! "

" And is that," she murmured, " what I am to tell Rose Anne ? "

" Yes."

The monosyllable was final. He uttered it in a whisper, but it had more than the value of an explanatory statement or even a poetic speech of renunciation. Bell felt her spirits sinking before the obduracy of the issue between them.

" I can offer you a job. It's an honest job, and I'm not making it for you. We need a man in the garage, helping to service the vans overnight."

" I'm a skilled shipyard worker. I'm sticking to my own trade and my own people."

" O dear ! "

She turned hesitantly and unhappily towards the car, and he walked with her.

" Well, there's something in here you've got to take," she said vehemently, leaning through the open door of the car. " There. That's a small parcel of nourishing food. It's for your mother. You don't need to touch it."

He took it in his free hand, and in the light of the street lamps, switched on even as they were talking, she saw that his eyes were full.

" I'll have to take it," he whispered hoarsely. " She's starving. God bless you ! "

" One will reach you every week," said Bell brusquely, to cover her own emotion. " No, I won't embarrass you in any way. It will be left by a van-boy. For your mother."

She climbed into the driving-seat and closed the car's door.

" Good night, Fergus ! " she said through the open window.

" Good night ! " he echoed her and turned away.

" The door will always be open," she threw after him desperately, but he pretended not to hear her.

Three weeks later, at the very height of the Christmas rush, Bell was disturbed in her office one evening by a secretary announcing a van-driver who insisted on seeing her in person ; and when the youth was shown in, a parcel under his arm, she knew what was amiss.

The Shaws were gone from Number Nine, Glenfruin Oval ; new

folk were in the house already. The inquisitive neighbour had run out to intercept the lad with the news, but she did not know where they had gone.

"She said she didny even see them going away," the youth reported. "She'd a kind of a notion that the hire-purchase folk sold them up, or mebbe they were behind wi' the rent. So I juist brought the parcel back."

"Quite right, Thomson. Thanks. You did your best. You're not married, are you?"

"No' yet," the youth replied, grinning.

"Well, just take the parcel home to your mother. It's just food. Perhaps it will come in handy."

"Thanks a lot, miss!" said Thomson, delighted with this pleasant and important conclusion of a mission.

5

The Oliphant Boys sat about the fire in the great West Room of the villa called Agincourt. It was a Sunday evening of late October: a time of day, week and year that invariably had the queer effect of oppressing the soft and melancholic spirit of the youngest surviving brother, Rupert.

It gave Rupert what he called to himself a sad feeling. He felt in those moods that life was ending in emptiness, and his weak though not unsubtle being was filled with an intolerably wistful sense of time lost and opportunity missed. He had always completely lacked the energy and courage to do anything but fall in with the order of life imposed by Ambrose and Jerome, but equally he possessed the unhappy gift of freedom from the illusions of authority and intelligence that sustained those two strange men.

Rupert in fact, fully aware of frustration, accepted it as being in the inexplicable order of things and was for the quiet life at all times; and his seasonal unhappiness was intensified this evening by the fact that Jerome was in one of his most violent, narking moods. It had been one of those bad days in the house, when the latest and most inefficient of a lengthening series of housekeepers had desperately sought to deputize for a cook who had walked out without notice and produced an evening meal which lamentably failed to come up to Jerome's exacting standards. He had been nattering and shouting and barking ever since against those many things in a wicked and ungrateful world which made the life of a gentleman increasingly difficult.

This habit was growing on old Jerry; he would burst a blood

vessel one of these days, Rupert often thought. Besides, he was fairly lashing into the booze, stoking the fires of his indignation. Rupert knew, though he was too lazy and timid to phrase it to himself, that Jerome's vocal excuses were but the bellowings of a frustrate spirit, shouting in a twilight of ineffectuality to keep its spirits up and cling to the illusion of influence. It was no more than a crude exertion of power over an audience too inert to criticize; it was mere shadow-boxing, and it fed and fattened on Ambrose's complacency and on his own, Rupert's, timid indolence.

To-night it was irritating. Rupert, with a dull headache behind his eyes, wished that Jerome would shut up. He wished that he had the courage to tell him so. It was no use. Nothing was much use nowadays.

"I tell you, Ambrose," Jerome went on, sucking violently at one cigarette after another and snapping his long fingers, "I'm damned if I'm going to stand this sort of nonsense much longer. We've always paid our servants good wages, given them decent treatment all round —haven't we, now? And what do we get back? Nothing but insolence, bad service, dashing off to the Pictures, and to-night, my God! an omelette you could have soled a pair of shoes with!

"It's too dam' bad. It's this Bolshevism playing pigs and whistles with the working classes. By God! I'd make an example or two if I had my way. A touch of the cat o' nine-tails to their backsides would make a difference, I'll bet. String up a few of those Labour leaders. Leaders! You take this chap Hitler in Germany——"

"Bit of a cad, Jerry, you must admit," Ambrose demurred. "They say he was only a corporal. Certainly not a gentleman."

"That may be. Not the sort of chap you'd take to the Club or anything like that. But he's making his own people toe the line, isn't he?" Jerome violently demanded to know. "He's got those Bolshies dam' well sized up, hasn't he? I'm not sticking up for his international policy, mind you. That march into the Rhineland was a bit of confounded cheek, and I don't like all this talk of pocket battleships and a new German Navy. Don't like it at all, not one dam' little bit. But when this chap Hitler shoots a few Communists and tells the trade unionists where they get off, then I wish we had somebody in this country with half his guts. Ramsay MacDonald!" concluded Jerome a thought irrelevantly. "My foot!"

He rose from his chair, pushing it back so sharply with his legs that the screech of the castors on the floor set Rupert's nerves jangling. Jerome pulled the stopper from a decanter, dashed a stiff measure of whisky into his tumbler, and pressed down the lever of a syphon as if the action accomplished the execution of one of his enemies.

"I'd go easy with that stuff, Jerry," suggested Ambrose quietly.

"Think I don't know what I'm doing?" retorted his brother truculently.

He took the central position on the hearthrug and pulled greedily at his glass. He was a fine enough figure of a man, thought Rupert, tall and clean-cut as to the features below iron grey hair; just like a judge or a leader at the Bar except for those neurotic tricks of pulling at cigarettes and flicking off the ash with a snap of stained fingers.

"Another thing," he resumed his diatribe, "talking of ships and Bolshies reminded me. Got it all from Penny Cunningham in the Club yesterday, and a dam' nice way to get it, wasn't it?"

"What is it now?" asked Ambrose with resignation.

"That precious sister of ours and the old *Iolanthe*. Good God Almighty! has the woman no sense at all?"

"But what's the trouble, Jerry?"

"Well, old Penny was over at Mallig yesterday, seeing his boat hauled up for the winter, and he got all this from Macnicol. From a damned boatbuilder, if you please! Seems the most damned awful things have been going on; talk of all the riff-raff up and down the loch. It was bad enough when she turned the blasted ship into a blasted convalescent home for her blasted girls, but now I'll be damned if she hasn't got the old *Iolanthe* packed at week-ends with a pack of filthy little brutes from the slums, yelling and spitting all over the place!"

"My God!" breathed Ambrose with feeling.

"That's nothing," Jerome capped his brother decisively. "Seems the whole show's in charge of a hang-dog brute of a Bolshie, a regular bad 'un: clever and all that, but a confounded rascal. Penny says Macnicol says the local people are up in arms, ready to chuck this Bolshie chap into the loch as soon as say Knife. The whole thing's a howling scandal. And what do you think of that?"

Neither of his brothers hazarded a view.

"If you ask me," Jerome resumed in the manner of one who conducts a police enquiry on the highest level, "this Bolshie chap's probably running one of these Red Sunday Schools. That's what I think."

"O, I say, Jerry!" Rupert dared to demur. "I wonder if that's true."

"True! What the devil do you know about it?" Jerome rounded on him viciously. "I'm giving you the facts, amn't I? Or do you know a dam' sight better?"

"No," Rupert agreed.

"Well, keep your mouth shut."

Rupert noticed that veins on old Jerry's forehead were standing out, congested between obtrusive knots, like the runs of moles on a

summer field between their mounds. He was vaguely interested at the same time in the fact that his brother seemed paler and older than he had closely observed him before.

"Go easy, Jerry," advised Ambrose.

"But if somebody tells me, straight to my face, I'm a damned liar!"

"He didn't."

"All right," Jerome resumed ungraciously. "But there it is! Like it or lump it, the poor old *Iolanthe*'s nothing but a hot-bed of Bolshevism. That sister of ours . . . My God! If Papa were still alive he'd have something to say . . . Something to say . . . I said——"

Jerome's voice ceased on the air. His last few words sounded weak and appealing, as if a great organ had broken off in the middle of the *Hallelujah Chorus* on a windless sigh. Rupert had the sudden, clear conviction, the surprising, alarming and not wholly unwelcome knowledge, that Jerome had spoken for the last time.

Paralyzed by alarm, he watched the tall frame sway and sag. He saw the glass drop from his brother's fingers and remembered ever afterwards how clearly he had noticed that it did not break, and that the swill of diluted spirit over the hearthrug seemed unduly untidy and wasteful. He saw Jerome humiliated by the stroke but still capable of taking the two steps to his chair. In just a few seconds Jerome ceased to be formidable and became pathetic.

It was admirable, somehow, that he did not slump in a heap within the soft, strong leather arms of the chair. Jerome sat on the edge of it, leaning forward as if eager enough to resume where he had left off. But while his legs and arms had still some power in them, he indicated by feeble gestures of his curled and useless fingers towards his open mouth that the power of speech, his only weapon in life, had been taken from him, and that he had been humiliated like any lunatic pauper.

"Jerry! What on earth's wrong?" cried Ambrose, wheezing out of his chair.

But Jerome could only shake his head feebly and point to his mouth with palsied fingers.

"Can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The head nodded feebly.

"We'll get you to bed, then. Can you stand up and walk? I'll support you. There we are. Now, steady! Open the door, Rupert. O, for God's dear sake, don't sit there like a blasted dummy! The door, you ass! And go and ring for the doctor."

Having obeyed these commands, Rupert returned to the West Room, well content to leave the frightful details of crisis to others. He was afraid. The shadowy immensities of the West Room suggested

to him the terrors of the mortuary. The stale, overheated, smoke-laden air smelled of death in his nostrils. But his lethargy was his refuge as always. He heard the doctor come and go after a long session upstairs. He heard Ambrose speaking to somebody on the telephone. He sat, waiting, until his brother returned.

"It's bad, Rupert," Ambrose announced. "Doctor's coming back with a nurse, but he doesn't think there is much hope. Poor old Jerry!"

"It's awful, Ambrose."

He was sorry for his older brother. He had always felt that Ambrose and Jerome were of another, earlier generation than his, sharers of a special friendship he could not enter. He could see how the shock had told on Ambrose in an hour, and that he suddenly seemed old, grey and paunchy. Ambrose would be what—fifty-six? Quite old. They were all getting old—this room, this house and the survivors of its original population.

"O, I'd better let Bell know!" said Ambrose suddenly, again heaving himself out of the chair. "It would help to have her down."

Shortly he was having his customary altercation with Trunks and then shouting at their sister; and Rupert reflected uneasily on the new complexity of life. It would be dreadful beyond imagination if Ambrose were to be taken suddenly as Jerome had been.

Jerome was dead before Bluebell reached the house early in the forenoon of the next day. Even as she was making for the city station in a workers' tram and thinking how beautiful in its opalescent way a frosty October dawn could be, Jerome passed out with only a little fluttering of hands and eyelids—"suddenly but peacefully," as Ambrose's announcement in the papers put it. She saw his body tidily laid out on the bed as the undertakers had arranged it for the coffin, and she thought how fine and dignified was his face in death. It was bitter to know that this physical distinction had enclosed naught but an emptiness.

She could not, however, profoundly analyze the nature of Jerome as she stood by his lonely corpse. He had been her brother, her mother's second son, one of the very last of the Oliphants. The mischief thought of his bastard child by Tottie Dykes darted through her head, but that had been a girl; and where was she now? Bluebell wondered. Ah! but the tale was all of old, unhappy, far-off things! Into the night went one and all, and now, processionally, the Oliphants.

When she rejoined Ambrose and Rupert in the West Room and had discussed the details of the funeral, Bell said suddenly:

"I wonder you stay on in this big house, Ambrose."

Her professional eye had taken in the shabbiness of the West Room, as of a once-famous club decaying under the sightless gaze of

its oldest members; its atmosphere sour with the odours of smoke, drink and worn leather. She had noted how the casual, indifferent services of hired women had left about the place those stigmata of undusted surfaces, fluffy corners and cob-webbed cornices that affront the pride of the possessive housewife.

"Stay on, Bell!" Ambrose jumped out of a moment of brooding. "What's that you said? Agincourt? You really mean to suggest?"

"I don't suggest anything, Ambrose. It's entirely your own affair," said Bell equably. "I was only thinking that these Victorian houses are far too big for most people now. They were put up when domestic labour was cheap, but they'd break any woman's heart to-day, and that's why you get worried, inefficient housekeepers and hoity-toity cooks. For only two of you now—really, Ambrose! Do you ever count the expense alone!"

"Count? Never done counting! I don't mind telling you, Bell," her brother dropped his voice as if this intelligence should be kept from Rupert, "it's getting to be a pretty tight fit. Rates, taxes, wages.—all that's bad enough; but the fact is, Bell, I'm sorry to say, poor old Jerry and I tried a flutter in that confounded Scottish Silks business and got our fingers burned. The poor old boy and I often talked about making a change, but what could we do?"

"Go and live at Inverquey," said Bell promptly. "The tower and the rooms left below make a nice little house. Now that there's just you and Rupert, a couple of country girls, or even just one good woman, could look after you perfectly well."

"Now, that's an idea! I say, Bell, that's a rattling good idea. Don't know how you think of these things, upon my Sam! Do you hear, Rupert? Old Bell here's got a stunning good idea."

Ambrose glowed in his innocent way at this revelation of the obvious; and then Bell saw his face grow grey and old again and the sadness of age enfold him once more.

"There's still Agincourt," he remarked emptily.

"Sell it," said Bluebell, deliberately decisive. "Give it to the town as a convalescent home or something. It's had its day."

Ambrose's dull eyes were fixed on the glow of coals in the great fireplace.

"Yes," he agreed slowly, "but when you come to think of it. All these years. People looked up to this house. The Oliphants. Papa would curse me like a trooper. And Mama . . . It must be nearly forty years since she died. It's like running away. Old Jerry up there all alone. And young Tristram. It's queer that the grave has to be opened again."

With a characteristically sudden and comic change of mood Ambrose snatched himself out of this thicket of reverie and engaged

Bell's sympathy with the open, glad look of one who has just hit upon a profound philosophical principle.

"The truth of the matter is, Bell," he said, "we aren't getting any younger. That's just the dam' thing, isn't it?"

6

"And where's your wandering boy to-night, Chris?" asked Rose Anne kindly.

With smiling tenderness, for ten minutes on end and over the edge of an evening paper, she had studied with the artist's loving eye the absorption of her half-sister in a long letter on thin sheets of foreign notepaper. It had come with the morning post and this, after dinner, was probably the girl's fifth reading of it.

Chris was still busy with her needle on that marvellous trousseau that had been building up for a long time now, but Rose Anne had affectionately watched the dropping of the needlework, the stealthy dive into the workbag for the precious letter, then the girl's utter loss of self-consciousness in the no doubt sturdy prose of Roderick Bell, Master Mariner.

Was there anything more moving in sentimental charm than the softness of a pretty young girl in love? Rose Anne had known love as an ecstasy and an agony in one, and she was happy that Chris had sailed so sweetly and securely into her appointment. She saw, and itched for brushes or crayons to depict the reality, how happiness in young and uncomplicated love had given the girl beauty in the glow behind the dark, rapt eyes, the line of the cheek from the long lashes to the small chin, and the wanton fall of a lock of hair complicating the profile of the neat little nose.

"He's in Spain, if you want to know," Chris answered her question. "In a place called Vigo. He says it's magnificent. O Golly! I wish we could go back to Spain, Bell. Do you remember the bathing at Sitges? And all that glorious noise in Barcelona?"

Bluebell lowered her *Time and Tide* and looked severely over its edge through the horn-rimmed glasses she now had to wear continually.

"If you would look at a newspaper occasionally, Chris," she said quite sharply, "you would know that Spain is no place for a holiday just now. You keep harping on Spain."

"Why not?"

"O God! Will it never stop?"

This outburst came on a wail of desperation from Rose Anne, a shudderingly open confession of sudden distress. All innocent alarm

and bewilderment, Chris stared at her half-sister to see her face twisted with grief and the humiliating signs of near-hysteria. She saw the tears come on a flood and then Rose Anne tottering towards the door, her hands fluttering like those of any Ophelia, distraught and light-headed.

"O dear!" she appealed to Bell. "What have I said? What have I done now? No, no, Bell! You mustn't look at me like that. You and Rosie always have secrets you never tell me, and I'm not just a child now."

Bluebell lowered the paper to her lap and took off her glasses.

"No," she agreed quietly.

This was for herself a more critical moment than anybody else would ever know. This was the moment, long foreseen and sedulously evaded, when the tutelage of Chris must cease and, therefore, the last illusion of sentiment among the Oliphant girls must vanish.

She had spent years and money in educating her father's youngest child to be a normally healthy, sensible, uncomplicated young woman, to be an Oliphant without inner conflicts, and she had succeeded. But she had long known that her care had been selfish in part, and that she and Rose Anne had cherished a darling of their own. Even Chris's betrothal to a plain, straightforward ship's captain had been part of the pretty play. Now the girl must be admitted to the wholly adult status and the long pretence break down.

"It's like this, dear," said Bell, picking her words. "There's a civil war going on in Spain just now, Monarchists against Republicans, Fascists against Communists or Socialists—a bitter, brutal business. But it isn't only the Spaniards. All over the world men and women interested in politics are taking sides. It's the sort of war that might spread all over the world, for that matter. All kinds of people from other countries want to go and fight for one side or the other in Spain, and poor Rosie's trouble is that Fergus Shaw is one of them."

"O dear! Poor, poor Rose Anne! Isn't it dreadful, Bell?"

Chris was sincere, but her terms were so conventional, her tone, perhaps accidentally, so flat in the manner of the afternoon tea-table in a suburban drawing-room, that Bell was overcome by an unwonted spasm of impatient bitterness.

"For Heaven's sake, Chris, it isn't a story out of the *People's Friend*! It's Rosie breaking her heart. Could you die for love of a man? If you can't, Rose Anne could. She's made that way. That's what you simply must understand about her and how she behaved just now."

Chris stared at the fire, its glow emphasising the sweetness of her face, and Bell was sorry that she had been induced to speak roughly.

"I see," said Chris at length. "Is he coming round to-night?"

"I expect so."

" Well, I won't disturb them. I'm going to my room to write to Roddy."

" I'm going to work in mine, but I'll call you when I take in the coffee," Bell agreed, adding with a weak little laugh, " We don't want to make it too solemn altogether."

Fergus Shaw had returned to their fireside, and the Saturday evenings at Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, had revived (as Bell saw it now) on one of the recurrent waves of general prosperity. She was old and experienced and tired enough now to be able to relate the consumption of liquor in her house, and the volume of talk, exactly to the rises and falls of Mr. Burns's beloved curves—red, blue, green, yellow and purple. Bluebell's, never utterly slack, had started to boom again in the early 30's, and now the proprietrix of these establishments could coolly match the fact with the other fact that the shipyards and engineering shops were rattling and humming again. Both Fergus Shaw and Mr. Burns had been so strangely right in their different ways of thinking about these concatenations.

Fergus had reappeared in her office in the first place, 'phoning from a call office for an appointment, and the little act of tact had given her pleasure. Sometimes she liked to think, with a private blush for the illusions of female middle-age, that the friendship she stoutly shared with this man had its decent place beside the stormy passion that raged uneasily between the poles of his self-dedication to an idea and the fragile, mysterious personality of Rose Anne.

" I thought you might come to see us again some day, Fergus," she had said when the first embarrassments of reunion were behind them. " Of course, we understood perfectly why you chose to stay away, though I still think you were wrong. Tell me, Fergus, was it a very bad time ? "

" It was very bad," he said gravely. " It was something you could never understand, with the best will in the world : the slow degradation, watching yourself turn into an animal, a dirty mongrel mooching about the ash-pits, picking up scraps. When my mother died——"

" She's dead ? O dear ! "

" Ach, I'm not blaming that on the slump ! She was just old and done, and for all she could eat . . . It was just her dying in a single-end and worrying about me. The bitterness of it," he laughed emptily, " is that she was class-conscious ! She had her bit of pride, and she never got over being put out of the wee house in Sandybanks."

" A shame," Bell had temporized, knowing only too well the inadequacy of the phrase. " But the shipyards are going again."

He had smiled at her with a sort of faint pity, then leant forward and said gravely :

"Listen, Bell! When my squad got together again and started work on the big P. & O. in Lintfield we had to rig up a rope to hold us against the pressure of the hammers on the bulkhead. There wasn't one of us could stand up to an ordinary man's job."

"Undernourishment?"

"Yes. But that's cured, though it took six months to do it. What isn't cured, and won't be in this generation, is the poisoning—the poison in the soul and guts of the working man. Ach, don't believe those newspaper stories about thousands of cheery lads marching back to work behind pipe bands! It was the newspapers put on the bands to get a photograph and a headline cheap. The old dope! The workers hate the System, don't give a tinker's dam for all the newspaper slush about the tradition of the River and the grand chaps they are. Rightly led, and they'll get the leadership, they'll smash the System that praises them when there's a war coming and forgets all about them when there's a slump."

"War, Fergus?"

"Watch this thug Hitler in Germany," he retorted. "He's a man of destiny all right, never mind how the cartoonists make him out a fool. Sure as guns are iron he's going to lead a big nation of Have Nots into war sooner or later, and a right bloody war it's going to be. But, my Heavens, it will be nothing to the war the workers are going to start afterwards!"

"That's a long forecast, Fergus," Bell demurred unhappily.

"I think it is sound, though you and I may not live to see it come true."

"Anyhow, you're coming to see us, and we'll have it out then. Why not to-morrow night?"

Bluebell had often pondered that strange conversation in her warm and almost luxuriously furnished office, a strongpoint of privilege, and was unhappy. All the instincts that education and environment had imposed upon her prompted her to suppress in her mind the ugly issues he had raised, but the brain of a chastened maturity in life and commerce could not leave them alone. It was too coldly clear that Fergus Shaw's grim premisses were already proving sound. The shipyards were busy, mainly with destroyers, submarines, cruisers, carriers and battleships; and what they called good times were sending the green line of Mr. Burns's net profits soaring across the graph. Already the theorem was beginning to complete itself with Hitler on the march at the head of millions of heavy, clumping feet, with civil war in Spain presenting the general issue of the larger conflict in compact and almost romantic form.

She sat in her comfortable lounge and brooded unhappily on the picture that had haunted her for months on end—that of the enfeebled,

undernourished men who had to brace the slack muscles of their backs against the shuddering recoil of the Thor hammers—and then the door-bell rang. She answered it herself.

Fergus Shaw had matured since he first pushed a bicycle into the ken of the Oliphant girls up the hill towards Maambeg. The approach of middle age and the impact of harsh experience had given mass and shape to the strong muscles of his face, so that it was as if, from being a youthful romantic in the Celtic mould, he had taken on something of a Roman aspect. His body and shoulders had filled out. In his eyes the sanguine fires of fanaticism had given place to the colder glitter of one with a purpose, perhaps unreasonable but clear-cut and formidable withal. As she showed him in with an exchange of the small greetings Bell knew for a certainty that he carried with him now a load of concern, if not of certainty.

"Nobody else in?" he asked casually, taking his usual chair.

"O yes! Chris is writing to her sailor boy, and I don't suppose we'll see her. Rosie's in her room, tittivating. She'll be through shortly. Then I've got to go and work, for my sins. There's not likely to be anybody else."

Bell felt exasperated by her own nervousness; she was sure that it must be obvious in a trembling of her voice, in the ineptitude of her anxiety to let him know that he and Rose Anne could count on being alone.

"Aye, we've a lot to talk about, Rose Anne and I," he said, and his tone seemed almost truculent. "And it's not going to be nice for either of us."

Bell rose and looked down on her guest's dark head and averted face.

"You have decided."

"Yes. The wild asses of the devil have got to be stopped. I've got to practise what I preach. It's all fixed for me to join the International Brigade."

"I wonder if that personal attitude is the right one," she said softly, as if only musing to herself. "Admitting that your analysis of the problem is sound enough, I wonder if you have the right solution. One violence against another. . . . But I suppose it's no use arguing."

"No use at all."

"Rose Anne will be through in a moment."

She knocked at her sister's door as she passed to her own room and was answered by a remote: "Yes. Just a minute." When she heard Rose Anne's door open at length and the door of the lounge close, she could not help picturing the scene.

All her instinct was to be with Rose Anne, as if the latter had walked from the security of her bedroom into physical danger. She

feared the consequences of the encounter in the mood of a mother who waits outside an operating theatre, her ears fearfully alert for a scream of pain or the shrieks of hysteria. But no sound came to her through the smooth-fitting doors and along the carpeted passages of the Victorian house. Whatever happened along there was between the lovers alone.

It was a long evening. Bluebell felt lonely and old, lapped unhappily in that feeling of life resolving towards an end that had grown on her gradually ever since the chain of association with her contemporaries had first been fractured by the unimportant death of Tristram. She did not find herself agitated now that the silence in the house had calmed her first fear for Rose Anne, though the burden of depression was not to be thrown off, and she was sufficiently absorbed in her work when a conspiratorial tap on the door announced the cautious approach of Chris.

"Are you not going to make coffee?" asked the girl in a half-whisper.

"I don't think so, after all," said Bell frankly. "Better leave them to-night. If they want it, they'll ask for it."

"Then I think I'll just go to bed, Bell."

"Quite right. Goodness! it's nearly eleven. Good night, dear!"

Then she sat listening again, once more apprehensive lest crisis should come with the parting. The door along the passage opened at length, but the subsequent muttering of two voices, male and female, in the hall might have been that of Chris and Roddy in one of their lingering farewells. The outer door opened, and now the voices, though subdued, echoed in the well of the stairs. They ceased, the outer door closed, and the footsteps of Fergus Shaw passed out of hearing. The switch in the hall clicked the light out, and Rose Anne's door slammed behind her.

Now this was really strange and frightening. Rose Anne knew for certain that her older sister was about and awake and yet had not even tapped a conventional good night in passing. Was she so utterly absorbed, distressed, or wildly defiant in that occasional way of hers?

Nervous and fretful now, Bell heard even through the solidity of the dividing wall the sounds of vehement movement that were as unmistakable in their import as pictures on a screen. She heard the noise of drawers being pulled open, of the hangers in the wardrobe slithering along the rod. The quick feet of Rose Anne moving to and fro drummed out a message as clear to Bell as a telephone call from her office.

She found herself staring at her own image in the mirror of her dressing-table. She regarded her face in the glass, now small and lined under hair that was neither fair nor white, and smiled wryly at

the reflection, as if ironically asking this image of a successful woman of business how she would propose to deal with an acute question of behaviour in her own house. She took off the horn-rimmed spectacles and seemed to see herself afresh as an ageing woman with responsibilities and a heart, fated to love and protect and manage such as Rose Anne, the wildflowers of modern life.

Shortly she was tapping at her sister's door, saying :

" I'm going to make myself a cup of tea. Would you like one ? "

" What's that ? "

The vagueness of a preoccupied person gave Bell her chance. She opened Rose Anne's door and walked in.

" I said I was making a cup of tea . . . Hullo ! "

" Well, what about it ? "

Two suitcases and a hat-box lay open on the floor. The bed was covered with folded garments, and an evening frock in black lace with a band of bright flowers along the hem of the underskirt hung in a dark and frivolous froth over its end. Behind all these things, a sort of frail and hectic amazon within a primitive fortress, stood Rose Anne.

" Fergus is going to fight in Spain," she announced with a dry sobbing in her voice.

" I thought he would," said Bell gently.

Suddenly Rose Anne ran to Bell and clutched her and buried her face in the crook of Bell's neck.

" And I've got to go with him ! " she sobbed desperately. " I can't let him go without having him all to myself. If it's only for a week together . . . Bell, Bell ! Dear Bell ! Try to be kind, try to understand ! "

Bell stroked the soft hair on which her own lips were resting.

" Darling, I don't need to try," she murmured. " I understand perfectly."

She patted her sister's back until the sobbing eased, then steered Rose Anne to a seat on the edge of the bed.

" I suppose it's the ten o'clock for London to-morrow," she said. " Very well. There'll be plenty of time to order a cab from Stirlings. Money, now ? Luckily, I've got a good deal in the house. I can let you have fifty pounds at least. You can buy francs in London if you want to go on to Paris. Is your passport still valid ? . . . But we'll see about all that in a moment. I'll go and make that cup of tea first of all."

It was always necessary to have order in these matters, even if your heart was breaking before the prospect of an end.

CHAPTER X

RED FIRES BURNING

I

CAPTAIN CALUM BELL, retired master mariner, stood up to ease the ache in his back, his left hand resting on the handle of the fork with which he had just lifted a half-stone of potatoes. They lay drying on the soil at his feet, fine, big second earlies of the Great Scot variety with gleaming yellow skins, and Captain Bell took pleasure in reflecting how triumphantly he had refuted those cynics among his farming neighbours who maintained there was little to be got out of the shallow soil of a garden standing so high as that about the old schoolhouse of Maambeg. Plenty of digging, plenty of dung, plenty of lime for the greens—that was the trick, although the oldest of all—so be it you kept a weatherly eye on proper rotation, cleaning a fresh section each year with the tatties and following up with the brassicas and the peas and what not in seemly order.

The ancient, mystic rhythm of the soil had given the sailor pleasure and solace in his advancing years, but now he reflected that the gardening tasks were apt to be a thought sore on an old chap, getting on for seventy. It would be a queer thing if he had to bring in young Fergus, the shepherd's laddie at Drim, to do the main digging at the back-end. It would be more than a queer thing, when you came to think of it; it would be retreat, for if there was anything about gardening in the mind of an ageing man it was its promise of continuity. You dug in the winter, sowed in the spring, reaped in the summer and autumn; and to think of a break in the process was to admit the likelihood of death. Captain Calum Bell decided at this stage of his ruminations that he would, after all, do his own delving once again and never mind young Fergus, decent lad that he was.

A sudden question darting across his mind made Captain Bell feel old and unhappy in a trice. But would there be any next year for the old country, let alone its pottering horticulturists? This chap Hitler and his obedient squareheads; all this stuff in the Nine o'Clock News about our pledge to Poland. Just the nations squaring up for a fight as he remembered them doing in the hot summer of 1914.

It was a good thing he had gone into Mallig yesterday and collected his recharged battery. Never could tell when something big would come over the wireless. (A great invention, that; wonderful com-

pany for an old lad who lived remotely by himself. He chuckled to think of old Mrs. Buchanan up at Cockalane who, being a hundred and nearly blind, couldn't get the hang of the thing at all and always told her daughter Jeanie to bring the good folk who had been singing to her into the house and give them a nice, hot cup of tea with hot girdle scones and fresh butter.) He had done a bit of chuckling himself yesterday in Mallig to see the burgh workmen digging up the lawns on the promenade to make shelter-trenches. It was the German bombers they were excited about. As if these flying machines could ever get the length of a wee West Scottish resort like Mallig, even if the Huns were daft enough to waste bombs on it!

So he had reflected yesterday; but to-day, although tired after labour in the heat of an August afternoon, he was aware of uneasiness. He had little more political knowledge than the simplest shepherd on the high ground above his home, but the eye of a sailor was not to be denied its veracity. When he paused at his work, his left foot resting on the shoulder of the graip, he saw on the Firth, open to the sun, signs that at once clouded his mature mind and stirred the ancient fires of his masculine will to action.

The ordinary traffic of the estuary seemed normal enough, the railway company's paddlers fussing from pier to pier and the big new turbine coming up past the Riccar Light at speed after her long run from Southbay, but Calum knew that the pleasure fleet in sight was vestigial, and that more than half of the little ships were already in the up-river yards, being hurriedly stripped and strengthened and painted grey for sea service. Two smears of smoke far down beyond the glimmering peaks of Corra were destroyers patrolling the approaches. Nearer at hand, almost under his feet, a small fleet of grey tugs and drifters were stringing a series of floats and buoys across the three miles of fairway between the lighthouses, the markers, moving with the ebb, making the loops of an untidy necklace across the throat of the anchorage. The Boom was being laid again.

This meant war, and the old man's heart was heavy. This was history repeating itself in deadly, fascinating rhythm, and the ominous mood of 1914 returned to fill him with unhappiness. It was a terrible thing that still another generation of fine young chaps would have to go through it all again, and a dirtier business this time than the last. He thought of his only boy, Betty's son, bringing his ship home from the Gulf ports, and he saw all too clearly the Atlantic breaking against the conning-tower of a U-boat cruising the ocean lane between Finisterre and the Fastnet. The baby was on the way, too; young Chris was standing by to go into dock any day now. Queer that his boy should have married an Oliphant! A fine, bright girl; that sister of hers, Betty's friend, wasn't the kind to make a mistake about

the upbringing of a young lass. But the whole damned rickmatick was queer, life and time and human relationships, and a sight less calculable than a garden.

An hour later, refreshed by a dish of tea but aware of restlessness, Calum went walking. It was as if the sights and thoughts of the day had somehow set up a personal problem, not urgent but yet incessant like a vague ache of rheumatism: a problem of which the solution was exquisitely evasive. A stocky, sturdy figure, remarkably elastic for his years, he marched down the track towards Inverquey, as if in the innocent riparian village he might find some surprising pointer to the next, proper action in crisis. Mrs. Macnee in the Stores might at least have an evening newspaper left.

At the turn above the bridge he saw a man resting on the parapet. Shortly he recognised Ambrose Oliphant, now his near neighbour at Inverquey and quite the laird in knickerbocker suit, hairy stockings and shoes with long, goffred tongues, a shepherd's crook always the symbol of his small authority. There had been an awkwardness between them since the Oliphant brothers had crossed the water from Garvel; they had been content to pass with a nod on their occasional encounters. Calum was making to do so again when Ambrose rose at his approach and hailed him.

"Going down to hear the news, Captain?" he asked heartily. "I don't think there's any doubt what's going to happen. You don't get our Navy chaps rigging up the Boom for nothing. No flies on the Royal Navy, thank God!"

"It looks bad," Calum agreed.

"O, it's coming all right. In fact, I've got a bit of inside information. This will interest you as a sailor. It's confidential, but I don't mind telling you, strictly between ourselves," Ambrose dropped his voice even in that upland emptiness, "the Admiralty has taken over our old house in Garvel—Agincourt, you know."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. All fixed up with the lawyers yesterday. It's to be the Admiral's own quarters and offices. Rather exciting, eh?"

The man was just a wind-bag like his father, thought Calum tolerantly. These Oliphant men had all this silly trick of being immensely important at second hand. This was why he had been stopped, to receive a trivial confidence the poor chap couldn't keep to himself.

"Yes," he said. "I've a notion the Firth is going to be a busy place in the next year or two. If the Germans have all the bombers they boast about——"

"The Air Force will look after them," Ambrose dismissed this awkward reflection with a laugh. "Won't stand up to our chaps for

five minutes! Still, as you say, we ought to have a good deal of shipping coming in here. If the Admiral has taken our old house—Agincourt, you know—well, I mean to say . . ."

A sort of slow, sad anger grew on Calum as he trudged uphill again, turned back from his first vague intention. His simple mind found it hard to understand why fine young chaps like Roddy had to fight and perhaps die for puffy and pompous asses like Ambrose Oliphant, who had never done a hand's turn in war or peace but, now that the Admiralty had taken a white elephant off his hands, was convinced he had a big part in the higher direction of the country's battle. Calum could not square this at all with his own instinctive understanding of a man's duty. Disliking the waste that is in all anger, however, he put Ambrose Oliphant out of his mind, supposing to himself that every ship had to carry so many useless passengers while the real lads did the work, and deliberately enjoyed the fragrance of the bog-myrtle that was rising now as the sun declined.

He made himself a bite of supper and tidily cleared up afterwards. He smoked a last pipe in the garden and gravely regarded the cabbages, leeks, kale, swedes and sprouts that had been thoughtfully planned to keep him through the winter, and he wondered if they would be used after all. It might be long enough before Betty's garden was dug again. Make a note to let old Mrs. Laird, the gamekeeper's widow at the Back, have the use of the green stuff if . . .

Man! it was queer when you thought of it—the sweet, quiet memory of Betty, the old difficult traffic of a Bell and an Oliphant, and the work of the little pleasure-steamers, all interlocking in the shadow of strife! Why, it seemed only yesterday that the yellow streak in Juley Oliphant came out after that queer night of fishing and smuggling with Terry Slavin off the Brunts! But that was an old story. Calum went indoors, and there were things to do. He adjusted the slide on the Fitzroy scale; the glass was falling sharply. Turning in, he set his alarum clock for five.

In bowler hat and raincoat tightly buttoned across his chest, an antique umbrella under his arm, having sturdily stumped five miles of moorland road under a lowering sky, Captain Calum Bell boarded at 8 a.m. next morning, at Kinlochmaam Halt, the city-bound train that had come down by the glens and the lochs from the Highlands.

It was always a slow brute of a train, especially on this last lap of single track before it joined the main coast line at Mallig Junction, and this morning it halted and jolted and stood panting incessantly until, at the highest point of the line above the loch, it seemed to settle down for a prolonged rest. Captain Bell saw the fireman get down from the cab to climb the steps of a signal-cabin, a billycan in his hand.

He was not impatient like the others in the compartment who had travelled through the night. He had the long day before him. This was apt to happen on the 8.03 from Kinlochmaam. He considered the surface of the loch, a quaintly reversed finger of the main Firth, and noted with acute professional interest that the freighters and tankers which had littered it during the bad days, rusting at anchor, were all gone now, cleared out as by the sweep of a broom. And over there on the far shore, in the bay under the Castle, a tug was at work, her smokestack belching as she backed and jerked forward again under the graceful fiddle-bows of a ship four times her size.

Calum wiped the haze of condensation from the window with the morning paper he had bought. And by the Lord Harry! his sudden guess had been right. Of all the coincidences! The way life kept humbugging you with its echoes and associations! That was the Oliphants' old *Iolanthe* being prised from her moorings. Her bottom would be as foul as the bottom of a parrot's cage, but there was a ship. They didn't build 'em like that nowadays—lean but sturdy, quiet but fast. The good old regular Navy, when you came to think of it, had a shrewd eye for a ship. Better by far than her first owner ever had—that poor, unfortunate chap, spoiled by too much unearned money, Juley Oliphant.

The train eventually started again, and before it reached the junction Calum understood why it had been delayed. Down the line from the city came train after train, each passing like a rocket with the noise of children cheering and yelling. The experiment of evacuation had started; infants from the clotted tenements of the riverside towns were to be thrust into the seaside villas of the well-to-do. A queer turn-up, thought Calum Bell, and a dreadful intimation of what those in authority seemed to expect of the German enemy. Aye, it was going to be a grim business; and his heart was heavy to hear and see how the slum children took it all as a rapturous holiday, screaming their heads off, holding out their little Union Jacks to shudder in the slipstream of the train.

A question at the city office of his old owners took him to a railway hotel that had been taken over as the Naval Office. Marine sentries directed him into a lift and passed him along corridors to a door mysteriously labelled POOL—ENQUIRIES. He was shown into a room already crowded with ageing, burly men, its atmosphere thick with strong pipe tobacco smoke, and at once the sense of depressed loneliness left him and he was glad that he had come. He was among friends of his own sort again. He was jovially hailed by name from all sides. Old chaps like himself shook his hand or squeezed his arm.

"Hullo, Calum, you old pierhead jump! I haven't seen you since you bailed me out of the clink at Newport News."

Ah! these were the boys, and this was good man's talk. These were the veteran officers of the Merchant Navy come to offer a hand when the old country looked like being in a bit of trouble. They were a delightfully comic lot as Calum Bell saw them affectionately, with their bowler hats and thick overcoats that never seemed to fit accurately over their developing paunches. They were a lot of old fools, in one way of looking at it, who should have stayed at home in their gardens and hen-runs, but there it was; there was just that something in the old tradition of the sea which, when things were going badly, brought the shellbacks to the fore again, their fingers itching for the feel of an engine telegraph handle.

Surveying his contemporaries with a great warmth of feeling, Calum chuckled to think that every man-jack of them was convinced that the regular Navy boys, fine, spirited chaps as they might be, were not just up to the job and required fatherly professional guidance.

One by one the veterans were called into a side-room, each emerging again with his own little joke to crack.

"Mine's a battleship, boys!"

"Don't be jealous, lads! I've got a trace-horse on the Newry Canal."

Calum's turn came, and he found himself facing a lean-faced officer with the broad gold band of a commodore on his sleeve.

"Bell . . . Bell, Captain Calum Bell . . . Here we are!" said the officer, riffling through a file.

He ran his eye down a column of detail on the paper then looked up with a smile.

"Not just a bit old for this job, Captain?" he asked.

"My life's worth less than a young chap's," said Calum, "and I know how to sail a ship. I'll bet you a pound, sir," he added eagerly, "your doctor will pass me A1 at Lloyd's for health, eyesight and the whole lashing."

The commodore threw back his head and laughed.

"I must say that you old chaps on the Reserve are the damndest set of fire-eating liars I've ever clapped eyes on! However, Captain, if the doc passes you we'll have something for you, I'm pretty sure. I can't promise anything, so don't try any old soldier tricks. It may be a fleet auxiliary, something on boom defence; it may be gaffering some one-horse harbour. I can't tell you."

"Anything that's going, and I'll be glad," said Calum in the resigned Highland way. "But there's one ship down the River there——"

"I knew it!" the officer groaned. "Damned lot of old soldiers, the whole bunch of you! Well, what is it?"

"Steam yacht called the *Iolanthe*, sir."

"Oho! Nothing wrong with your eyesight, Captain."

"Well, there's a bit of sentiment in this, sir, but that's a real ship. That's the sort of ship I could sail to some purpose. Was there ever a prettier model?"

"I don't suppose there was," the commodore agreed with professional gravity.

"Now," said Calum, warming to his subject, "just give me a ship like that. Give me a couple of good watchkeepers, a good Chief down below, a good lot of chaps in the Sparks room, and a good bunch of trained naval gunners, and I'll sail that ship to Hell or Halifax—or into Hamburg, if you like."

The commodore laughed loudly again.

"You're a crazy lot, I must say!" he gasped. "Of course you know that all the postings have to come through Whitehall. However, we'll make a note," and he pencilled something on the sheet before him and held out his hand. "That's fine, Captain. Thanks for coming. When you go out, will you pass a signal to Captain Methven —Methven, B. J.? I expect he'll try to get the *Queen Mary* off me."

Calum rejoined his friends, feeling that he had done not too badly; and shortly a cheery party of retired mariners, still rolling in their gait and now loud-voiced in expectation, were setting a course for Fisken's Bar and a dram and a long, masculine session of reminiscence, taking in all the ports of the world from Tampico to Nagasaki.

2

The May sun beat hotly on the Luxembourg Gardens. A week of blazing weather had rendered that frequented corner of Paris dustier than ever. Where the croquet mallets and balls were clacking under the trees, Rose Anne could see that every shot raised a powdery plume behind it, that even the hoops of children stirred a tarry grit as they sped over the tarmac on the paths. She could feel the afternoon heat prickling the backs of her gloveless hands.

Rose Anne Oliphant, however, was in that moment of time nearly blind and deaf to the sights and sounds of Paris about her and completely indifferent to the undertones of mass anxiety that throbbed ominously behind the exclamations and objurgations of the croquet players and the chatter of mothers and nursemaids, knitting with apparent serenity on the benches while the children played.

In another mood she would have observed that the men playing the immemorial game of croquet were older and fewer than usual. She would have seen the regulars gather in knots between games and heard them voice excited opinions in the French way, waving arms

and hands and reiterating a group of names and phrases : " Gamelin . . . Daladier . . . La Ligne Maginot . . . Le Roi Albert . . . Les Boches " and, most ominous of the catchwords, " A Bordeaux." She might even have noticed how, now and again, one or other of the knitting mothers would tilt back her head and scan the eastern sky.

But this uneasy Paris of May, 1940, had hardly any reality for her as she sat listening to the fluent, cozening talk of a shabby, dark man beside her on one of the benches. Her own Paris had been for three years now but a waiting-room. It was in Paris that she had parted at length from Fergus Shaw away back in '36 ; in Paris, as at a sentry- or listening-post, she had waited for his return and, latterly, only for news of him.

Long ago she had known that he would never return. Survivors of the Republican Army, inevitably passing through Paris, had all shaken their heads. She knew that Bell, writing regularly from Scotland and urging her to come home to commonsense and an acceptance of facts, had the wisdom of Martha. But she, Rose Anne Oliphant, the fallible Mary, had waited in Paris ; and now, beside her on the bench in the Luxembourg Gardens, was one who, having perilously escaped from the Spanish prison on foot over the Col de Perche, had been vouched for by the secret men of the Underground as one who had veritably seen Fergus Shaw killed and buried. And what was tottering France to all that ?

He was a tattered little Irishman of the rebel type, with smoky grey eyes lending a dangerous charm to a prognathous face.

" And that's the trut' of it, ma'am, I grieve to be telling you," he repeated his story. " It was outside a little bit of a place called Cala-campo up by Guadalajara thonder. The Moors was holding the high ground, and we was attacking through the stooks of corn, and the afternoon sun fair blistering. He was our section-leader was Fergus Shaw, and a right gallant man, and he made to head a rush at wan of them machine-gun posts, and they got him. He was kilt clean, and yez can say that to yourself."

" You don't know where he was buried ? " Rose Anne asked.

" That I do not, so help me God ! " the Irishman declared. " We could not shift them Moors, and we had to retire, for most of our leaders was kilt by now. The lads took turns carryin' his body back, but the bloody Moors came at us down the bit hill, and we left him in a bit shed behind one of them wee Spanish farms they have. The folk would bury him in the orchard likely, for they are good, kind Catholics, every wan of them. But no more do I know, lady, and that's the God's trut'."

Rose Anne was not in Paris for the next few minutes, but in a cornfield in Spain she had never seen.

"It's hard on the likes of you, lady," her companion insinuated.

"O! Me! No, it's kind of you to tell me. Some day, perhaps . . . What are you going to do now?"

The gallus soldier of fortune reasserted himself within the shabby frame of the defeated.

"Ach! I'll jine the Foreign Legion or somethin' and have another smack at the Fascist swine. I owe them one or two for Guernica."

Rose Anne lifted her handbag from her lap and opened it tentatively.

"You must be having a hard time," she said. "Will you let me lend you a little until——?"

The mercenary, the recurrent figure in European history, did not protest, and she slipped a thousand franc note into his hand.

"God bless you, lady!" he whispered, rising and smiling on her with those blarneying grey eyes. "A pity I hadn't a kinder word for you, so it is, but he was a fine man and a brave soldier, your friend. It's for his dear soul and yours I'll be saying a prayer in the cathedral up-bye."

He fingered his dirty beret and slipped away, mingling with the felicity of a cat in the crowd. Rose Anne rose automatically from the bench and made round the basin to the gates opposite the Gare Luxembourg.

She was empty of purpose, floating indifferently on the seas of the existence the Parisians seemed to find so desperately enthralling. Her life had stopped long, long ago in a cornfield hard by the hamlet of Calacampo in the province of Guadalajara. Now she had only a vague impulse to move towards the Quartier to resume the pretence of living the artistic life she had kept up since she had seen the last of Fergus Shaw at the Quai d'Orsay. Not that it mattered much where she went.

She was passing the School of Mines when a small car drew into the kerb with a facetious tattoo on the horn behind her. Rose Anne ignored it until a plump face, its youthful heartiness belying the dignified pretence of a curly yellow beard, engaged her indifferent gaze.

"Hullo, Mother Goose!" the driver hailed her. "Whither away?"

It was Rex Narracott—Reno Rex, they called him in her circle, for he talked much of his father's ranch in the State of Nevada—and he used the nickname Rose Anne's air of distracted fragility had earned her.

"O, hullo, Rex! But why the car?"

"Why the car? For crying out loud! Say, Rose, hop in and I'll tell you just why. Guess it hasn't occurred to you yet."

She was pulling at a faulty door-handle of the small and shabby Renault when the sirens started to howl the air-raid warning. The piercing but dismal bellowings filled the boulevards, sent the pigeons whirling upwards in drifts from the roofs of Paris, and with their crudity mocked the city's civilized tradition.

"That's why I bought the car," said Rex Narracott grimly as she hurriedly slammed the door behind her. "Let's beat it for shelter, and I'll give you a load of mighty hard fact."

They jumped from the car in a narrow street off the Boulevard Raspail and followed a little crowd gathering in an archway there. They could hear the guns popping away to the northward. A drumming of aero-engines filled the sky nearer at hand.

"Hope these are ours," said Rex crisply. "I mean French. Better still if they're British. But look here, Mother Goose, it's getting tough, you know."

"You mean the war?" asked Rose Anne innocently. "I thought I heard somebody say the news was bad."

"You thought . . . Say, Rose! Are you pulling that old line of British nonchalance, by any chance? Forget it, and get this. France is finished—*fini, foutu, kaput.* The Boche will be in Paris in a week, a fortnight . . . it's anybody's guess. You said you heard the news was bad? It's worse than that, sister. There ain't any news at all. I was round at our Embassy to-day, and what they told me wasn't nice at all. So I bought the buggy, see? And I'm lighting out for England, home and beauty this very night. Do you get me, Rose?" and he squeezed her arm kindly. "I'm offering you a seat."

"How kind of you, Rex!"

"It's gonna cost a whole lot of money, this trip," her friend went on earnestly. "That old box of tricks out there set me back five hundred bucks already. There'll be the boat across the Channel. That's fixed through a buddy of mine in Boulogne. But the Larsens are sharing. There's four of us that can stand the racket. Believe me, Rose, it's happening so that money just don't count one least little bit."

As Rex wound up his argument the sirens lamented again. Now, however, their rising voices steadied on the single note of the All Clear, and the small crowd of refugees started to move out of the archway, assuring each other in the French way that *nos avions* had assuredly driven the dirty and stupid Boche back and across to his own side of the Rhine.

"False alarm this time," said Rex Narracott, "but not the next time. So what about it, sister?"

"Yes, Rex," she said brightly. "I'd like to go home. I'd rather go with you than anybody else. It's good of you, Rex, so good! Why should you be so kind to me?"

"Waal," said the American, assuming a drawl to tease and please her, and a little to cover his own embarrassment, "guess it's because you ain't the man-eating kind and because you kinda bring out the heavy father behind this trick beard of mine. But looky here, Rose; straight talk. I'm driving you to your apartment right now. You'll pack, and you'll put all you need in one grip; just one grip and no odd bits and pieces. Randi Larsen is looking after the eats, so you can forget that. I reckon we've the most part of two hundred miles to ride, and we've got to cross in the dark, so I'll be round for you again at five. Got that, Rose? Five p.m.—seventeen-O-O hours on the dot? My, if you keep me waiting one minute!"

"I won't, Rex! Promise—cut my throat! You're thè real god in the car. It's so grand of you!"

"Boloney!" said Rex Narracott. "This is the skin game now."

She was ready in time, an infrequent occurrence in Rose Anne's dreaming life, and indeed she waited half-an-hour with her hat on and her hand fingering the strap of her hat-box, like any schoolgirl waiting for a train to take her home for the holidays.

Rex Narracott's intervention had cut abruptly through a clot of dried stuff in her soul. He had suddenly created another beginning and given her the purpose of being with Bell again, of taking up the old secure life where she had left off. The *concièrge* had been astounded by her new brightness and by the gaiety with which she gave away her wardrobe and paid double the rent due, a form of British lunacy highly gratifying to a Frenchwoman even if *la patrie* was in the incredible act of falling, the Grand Army confused, sullen and doomed. And since Rose Anne had little enough sense of the historical tragedy impending and none at all of physical danger to herself, she lost no care over the nature of her parting from Paris and faced the strange journey in picnic mood.

In bitter fact its start cruelly parodied a holiday outing, for when they had crossed the river and made along the line of the Avenues towards Neuilly the little overladen car became one of such a stream as pours out of any overcrowded city on a fine Sunday afternoon. The brightness of the evening, the familiar smell (seemingly compounded of the odours of oil, petrol, burning tobacco and face powder), and even the prams and bits of bedding that so strangely decorated many of the vehicles racing north and west, heightened Rose Anne's unreal sense of being on a delightful and surprising jaunt.

"But it's so jolly, Rex, isn't it? Talk about going to Epsom on Derby Day!" she cried, adding innocently: "But where are they all going?"

"Aw, for God's sake, Rose!" pleaded Rex quite angrily. He was putting out a great physical and nervous effort in keeping the

sad little car in a decent position in the turbulent stream. " They're just getting to hell out of Paris while the going's good. They're running for their blasted lives, same as we are. This isn't a production in glorious technicolor. This is bloody, ugly war."

" O ! I'm sorry, Rex. It's all so strange after——"

" Waal, try to sleep on it, sister," he retorted, still testily, " and leave it to the man at the wheel. Not another wisecrack out of you till I shake off these bums."

The Norwegians in the back seat were silent, perhaps remembering the dark associations of Narvik and Namsos and Andalnes. It grew on Rose Anne that her companions were worried and even afraid, not desperately gay inside like herself, and she decided that she would be sedulously good and quiet.

They came to Beauvais, and on the coast road which Rex eventually found the traffic was thinner, though still fast. Randi Larsen silently distributed sandwiches, and Rose Anne passed his share to Rex who, his eye always on the bumper ahead, engulfed one of these Scandinavian tit-bits at a bite, each time saying " Swell, Randi ! " The Norwegian lady served coffee out of a thermos, and again it was Rose Anne's task to hand the hot cap into the blind left hand of the driver, her own wisp of handkerchief about it. Rex could quaff one at a gulp, with a rather unpleasant sucking noise through his beard ; but Rose Anne saw how steady were his eyes on the road, how cool and strong his hands in their touch on wheel and lever.

She made herself as comfortable as possible in the tiny bucket seat and watched the last of France pass on an illuminated, fast-moving scroll before her eyes.

Dear France of the orchards and the flat, green market gardens and the ramshackle, Disney cottages and the striped awnings ; France of the regimented plantations, the irrigation canals mathematically plotted, the level-crossings, the bridges over sluggish rivers, the old, sweet churches ! She saw strange names, like Poix or Arraines, but recognized everywhere the persistence of the wholly French pattern. In the dusk she realized that they had come into Normandy with its chalky bluffs, empty and flowered fields, and the magpies flashing around every tuft of trees.

" Normandy—the land of the Normans," announced the prim voice of Randi from behind, breaking a long silence within the car. " This is where our Norse forefathers have conquered. It is very strange."

" Sister, you've said a mouthful ! " muttered Rex ; and Rose Anne could have laughed to think of the effect of the North American comment on the pale-faced, bright-haired but faintly bleak Scandinavian woman behind her.

She dozed. The headlamps were switched on. Ever and again they gleamed on the white gables of cottages and farmhouses that seemed somehow to have swung themselves cornerwise across the road. . . . A halt and a drumming of the tired engine; that was a level-crossing . . . In the green light from the dashboard Rex's beard took on a ludicrous but fascinating colour; and how would one lay out the palette to get exactly that livid tone?

A jolting over cobbles roused her again. Now it was very dark. She was aware of the sea's strong smell in her nostrils.

"Where are we?" she asked foolishly.

"We're on the last lap now, sister," answered Rex, tolerant again. "Running up the coast towards Boulogne. Those thank-you-ma'ams were Etaples. And won't this citizen be glad to feel the clutch of a good American car under his feet on a Nevada State highway? O boy, O boy!"

She must have slept again, for the next Rose Anne knew was that the car had stopped, its journey ended in a mean, dark street in nowhere, as it seemed.

The atmosphere of unreality about the adventure was now complete. When Rex Narracott knocked on a door that could hardly be seen in the blackness of the alley Rose Anne had the feeling of being about to take part in the melodramatic climax of a murder plot. The thud and boom of shells and bombs exploding in the near distance, an occasional shaking of the ground and a shuddering of windows, seemed proper elements of the lunatic setting. It was a situation too extravagant for fear.

The mysterious door opened cautiously, and the refugees passed out of darkness into the surprising light and cosiness of a little café-restaurant. Two girls in laundered aprons were homely figures in front of the bar. The proprietor was, for a Frenchman, a surprisingly tall and elegant figure in a lounge suit of English cut.

"My old friend, Marcel Briac," Rex made the introductions. "Knows the swell restaurants of London and New York better than any of us. That right, Marcel?"

"It may be so," said the Frenchman in agreeable English. His little bow had an exquisitely professional reticence. "Now I have a little meal prepared, and I hope, *madame, mademoiselle*"—he bowed again to the ladies—"that it will be an agreeable souvenir of France. *Maintenant, un aperitif, bien entendu?*" He clapped his hands. "Jacqueline! Mariette!"

The two waiting girls came forward, smiling, and the innkeeper supervised the important business of ordering, explaining gravely:

"I have prepared a hot, thick soup. You're journey may be long and cold, and——"

"The boat all fixed, Marcel?" Rex interrupted anxiously.

"It will be on the beach at midnight, one hundred metres west of the pier. That is in order," the innkeeper assured him with calm precision. "*Alors*, you have an hour in which to eat at leisure. After the soup, a very simple chicken *en casserole*. *A suivre*—to follow, you would say—I would suggest a cheese—Gruyère, for example—bread, butter. It is sensible to eat plainly before a Channel crossing. But if *madame, mademoiselle*"—and again the gracious little bow—"would prefer, shall we say, a *soufflé* . . ."

"No, no, M. Briac!" Rose Anne assured him. "Bread and butter alone sounds lovely."

"*A votre service, mademoiselle,*" said the Frenchman. "If you will now excuse me. I am alone in the kitchen."

He withdrew with another bow, and one British, one American and two Norwegian citizens nodded to each other over their glasses.

"It's a quaint set-up, ain't it?" said Rex Narracott cheerfully. "In case you folk are bushed, we're in Le Portel right now, which is a kinda western suburb of Boulogne, and the old White Cliffs ain't thirty miles away. But we've still got to get across in the dark, and that's where we've got to trust Marcel and the fishermen he's hired to take us over. I'd trust Marcel, just the same."

"He is very courteous," said Randi Larsen gravely.

"And so French!" Rose Anne capped her gaily. "This interest in good cooking, at the last moment . . ."

"A continuing interest in art—as cooking is an art—in circumstances of most horrible," observed Randi's husband, the Norwegian architect, a serious man, "declares the survival of civilization."

"The French have left it a bit late," said Rex drily.

"In our Norway to-day . . ."

A heavy explosion not far away shook the room and even set the cutlery on the table jangling.

"And it's all plumb crazy, just the same," Rex Narracott insisted.

The meal was perfect. For long enough afterwards Rose Anne wondered that, in the hour of extinction, their French host could put so much care into the preparation of new potatoes, small and sweet with the flavour of mint and garlic subtly superimposed, and into the mere ordering of the table with its fresh, stiff linen, the careful and continual wiping of glasses by the girls, the exact warming of a bottle of Volnay.

"*Il faut boire bien,*" said M. Briac seriously, "*avant l'arrivée des Boches.*"

Moving backwards and forwards from his kitchen he would rest his slim hands on the end of the table and communicate his bits and pieces of news. Those occasional explosions? Ah, that was Calais

where, one understood a small British garrison was holding out against the Boche. The greater trouble, it appeared, was farther up the coast, at Dunquerque. There the situation, by all accounts, was formidable. It was widely reported that the British Army in retreat was trapped there on the beaches.

But could one believe all one heard? It was only clear, meanwhile, that *madame, mademoiselle et messieurs* were wise to attempt the passage to England. The fishermen he had engaged were of superlative probity, their boat swift and strong. But, no! He, Marcel Briac, would stay. That was a point of honour.

"*Alors!*" he announced, waving forward one of the girls who carried a dark bottle on a salver, "now we drink a toast in *fine maison. Madame, mademoiselle et messieurs—bon voyage!*"

"*Et vive la France!*" Rose Anne was inspired to cry.

M. Briac bowed profoundly, and all drank solemnly. It was very French, this scene, reflected Rose Anne. Its wholly native character seemed rounded off when one of the girls presented Rex with a folded bill on a plate, and she saw him pay it with a goodly sheaf of notes.

"Now to the beach," said M. Briac. "We must walk, but it is not far. The auto, Mr. Narracott?"

"She's yours, Marcel," answered Rex lightly. "Guess you may need her soon enough."

It was quite a short step down a steep, cobbled lane to the beach, a considerably longer walk on firm sand to the water's edge. The night was dark, but the sand reflected a gleam from the sky, a silvern gleam shot with the ruddiness of flame, and soon there loomed ahead the bulky figures of three men standing by the water's edge and the shape of their boat floating a little offshore.

Marcel Briac hailed the fishermen softly; the inevitable, vivid Gallic conversation ensued.

"*Alors!*" Marcel turned to the refugees at length. "All is ready. The boat cannot come nearer the shore, but you, *madame et mademoiselle*, will be carried out on the fishermen's backs. You, *messieurs*, will no doubt contrive. Your hat-box, *mademoiselle*, if you will hold it firmly. Your foot on my hand, if you please, while I assist you . . . *Voilà!*"

It was ludicrous. The departure from stricken France, like so many other crises in life as Rose Anne had lived it, lacked the ideal dignity of form. Marcel's words of parting should have been on a high rhetorical note, and they were only instructions to mount herself in an ungainly sprawl on the back of a French fisherman! But when they were all safe on board the vessel and it was backing out to the thrust of the drumming engine a figure stood solitary on the shore and waved a white handkerchief.

"Guess old Marcel's feeling kinda lonesome back there," opined Rex Narracott.

The sea was calm, the air soft. The Norwegian couple announced gravely that they would go down into the fish-hold and try to sleep.

"Who knows," asked Randi Larsen gravely, "what adventures we may not have before morning?"

Rose Anne and Rex, however, found a nook behind coils of rope at the root of the mast and, having arranged a tarpaulin over their heads, insinuated themselves into an intimate huddle therein.

"It shouldn't be too cold to-night," observed Rex cheerfully. "If you shiver, sister, just cuddle closer or whatever it is the song says. I sure an't in any romantic mood right now. Say, Rose! Look up there. That's a pretty fair picture of hell."

The fishing-boat was by now some three miles clear of the coast, and over the mass of Gris Nez the flames of Calais were luridly reflected from the pall of greasy oil-smoke that hung above the town. Ever and again the glow seemed to be extinguished suddenly, as by a switching off of current; then the thud of another bomb would come at them over the water; and then the flames would leap again, brighter than ever.

"The dreadful thing," aid Rose Anne, trembling, "is that it's picturesque, almost pretty."

"The artist's old problem," Reno Rex agreed. "We're flying for our miserable lives. We enjoyed a civilization on the strength of superior purchasing-power, and it's being burned up under our eyes. And now we admire the process. Gee, Rose!" he dropped into the vernacular, "you and I are crazy, or God's a sadist. It just don't make sense."

The boat moved on into the immensity of the Channel, and Rose Anne had the feeling that its journey was insignificant somehow, and that their adventure, spectacular in the ordinary way of things, was a shabby, furtive affair in the light of the fires burning over the seaports of France.

Even as she was turning over in her mind this problem of relative significance, however, a sudden altercation broke out among three of the fishermen at the stern, while a fourth, who had been acting look-out in the bows, raced aft to add a peculiarly shrill voice to the clamour of Gallic dispute.

"Whadya think's biting these citizens now?" asked Rex lazily, as if he had been half-asleep.

As if in immediate reply to his question the engine stopped, and the squat vessel, losing way rapidly, wallowed sluggishly in the swell.

"Here! Say! Hell!" shouted Rex, jumping to his feet. "What sort of racket is this now?"

He stalked aft. Rose Anne lay still, listening, but the clamour of competitive voices was beyond her understanding. She gathered that Randi's husband came up from the fish-hold to join in. Rex's shouting was strong and angry. Suddenly Rose Anne felt extremely foolish to be sitting there against the mast of a French fishing-boat stopped in the Channel past midnight. The tragic farce was surely working to its end.

But the voices gradually quietened. She heard Rex speak coolly and decisively. The French skipper gave a curt order. The look-out man moved forward to his post. The engin estarted again, and the boat came round in a wide sweep to resume her course towards England.

Rex rejoined Rose Anne in the shelter of the tarpaulin.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" he cursed vehemently. "Those dirty, lousy, bloody Frenchmen!"

"But what was it?"

"A plant! A racket! And we're the suckers. Kidding on that the engineer was scared and wanted to go back. Bid us up another five thousand francs before he changed his mind again. Gees! those French make me sick in the guts. Even old Marcel back there does a Last Supper act, but doesn't forget to charge Ritz-Carlton prices for it. Now this bunch of hoodlums have to work their own racket. And we're asked to weep for *la belle France* in agony! Damned if it ain't the clearest case of cause and effect I've ever struck. I'm sick, Rose Anne, I'm sick. Just you watch a good American kneel down and kiss the soil of England when we get there, and if. And O, say! Rose. Look! That must be Dunkirk."

He pointed towards the east. The boat was well out to sea now and, clear of Gris Nez, they could see beyond the fires of Calais, dwarfing them in significance, the monstrous lour of flame and smoke over the more northerly harbour. The noises of battle were distant now, but an occasional ripple of blast continued to reach them, and a smear of smoke on the sea and the smell of burning in their nostrils made horror intimate.

"The terror of it!" murmured Rose Anne. "The waste and cruelty!"

"Yes, terror, waste and cruelty," repeated her companion.

She had a close glimpse of his face in a sudden flash of fire. Above the affected beard the features were fine and strong and young, the eyes on the distant scene of battle almost wistful.

Under that lour of smoke and fire which so affrighted Rose Anne Oliphant and Rex Narracott as they saw it across several miles of sea H.M. Armed Yacht *Iolanthe* lay against the East Mole of Dunkirk

Harbour. For the second time within twenty-four hours she had come in from Dover on the rising tide to lift what she could of the survivors of the British Expeditionary Force.

It was like taking a tea cup to empty a mountain stream, thought Calum Bell sadly as he watched the process of embarkation from the wing of the bridge. That drab stream of men was long, steady, endless and had been so for longer than he cared to remember in a mind that was nearly dizzy with fatigue. The Mole itself was but a narrow bridge of planking, against which in ordinary times no prudent seaman would have laid a barge. But thus to the ships a British Army in retreat must come: an army in retreat and defeat but still a force steadily disciplined. Fine lads, these British soldiers! They had waited for hours for the ship. They came down the Mole in silent order. They were hungry, thirsty, half-asleep on their feet, yet no man pushed ahead or stepped aside. Each carried his rifle, the symbol of his personal victory, and none looked over his shoulder at the flames of the burning town.

Calum Bell had been round the decks of his ship again and again already. Where Julius Walter Ivie Oliphant and his guests had lolled and strolled in elegance he had seen with a deep satisfaction how the British soldier in extremity, having found a place for the mere length and breadth of his body, would settle down quietly between his mates and go to sleep. Fine lads! It did a man's heart good to be of help to them.

In the mind of the shipmaster, however, there anxiously lingered the old teaching of all his years at sea: that his first and last task was to bring his ship, passengers and cargo safe to the home port. He leaned over the sandbags on his bridge and hailed the First Lieutenant, who stood at the head of the gangway on the deck below.

"How many is that now, Number One?"

"Just over six hundred, sir," the young voice replied, adding hopefully: "We managed more than seven hundred last trip, sir."

"Yes, but——"

Moving rapidly past the slow-moving files of troops, like a tight-rope walker on the outermost plank of the jetty, a tall figure in a peaked cap approached with the unmistakable air of confident authority.

"How do you stand now, Captain?" the newcomer shouted.

"That's more than six hundred on board, sir. I can take more."

"No," the order was decisive. "Stop there and haul out. I've got two of the big carriers coming in, and I need all the berths I can get. Anyhow, the ebb's moving fast to-night, and with that deep draught of yours . . ."

"Very well, sir."

The naval man turned to the soldiers.

"Halt there, lads," he said. "Another ship will be alongside in a jiffy. We'll do our best for you."

The line of soldiers halted, and Calum Bell's heart was heavy for them in their obedient resignation. They seemed so lonely. He also thought of the splendid loneliness of this tall officer who, for days and nights on end, strangely fortified by a tradition, had defied fear and dog-weariness to impose order on the traffic in and out of the battered and hopeless port.

He rang for his engines. The planks that had made a gangway were brought inboard with a double slam. In the light from the fires he could see the faces of the men in the leading file of soldiers lifted to his bridge and seeming to question him, but patiently.

"Look out for a new wreck near Number Nine buoy, off Mardyck," the naval officer advised as the *Iolanthe* started to inch out of the precious berth. "Make for the West Deep and pick up anything that may be adrift from the Beaches. *But don't hang about.* That's the order. See that you're well away from the coast by first light. We can't afford to lose any more good ships and good men."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Calum responded. "Good luck, sir!"

"Good luck to you, Captain! You're doing a grand job."

At dead slow astern the *Iolanthe* backed out of Dunkirk Harbour. Conning her passage from the bridge Calum Bell, knew at once a desperate anxiety and an exquisite delight. At almost every moment his mind had to reproduce visually the complicated chart of that graveyard of good ships, that eternal puzzle of sandbanks and tidal eddies, doubly mysterious in the darkness. At the same time he rejoiced in the smoothness and responsiveness of his ship's engines, in her sweet obedience to the helm and, not a little, in the subtlety of his own art of ship-handling. And at the back of his mind there was always the wonder how he and his ship's company could ever face it again and if, as they undoubtedly would, they could once more find a way to the patient soldiers through a growing confusion of the vessels, large and small, efficient and ludicrous, that a seafaring nation was recklessly throwing into the traditional business of bringing its sons home to the island.

He had with him on the bridge his two watch-keeping officers and as many lookout men as could be mustered. Even at slow speed through the relatively open waters of the Roads the high fiddle-bows of the *Iolanthe* seemed to be brushing off an endless flight of skoots, launches, trawlers, smacks, tugs, sweepers, lifeboats and what not: all the seafaring members of the family come, with or without deep-water skill, to lend a hand.

Now and again Calum Bell cursed a destroyer that, passing at

speed with the most gallant intention, set even the *Iolanthe* joggling in the narrow channel and sent viciously-curling stern waves to crash among the launches and ship's boats that served the Beaches. He heard many cries of terror and distress that night and still had to harden himself to go on with his six hundred men and leave the suffering to the little ships and the mercy of Providence.

In the Zuydecotte Pass he was held up for an hour and stamped on the bridge while a boat was lowered and some thirty French soldiers, on a raft that had broken away from a tow out of the improvised jetty at La Panne, were recovered from a boil of the tide ebbing on the Smal Bank. Anxiously he saw the first faint intimations of dawn over the mystery of Europe. Before the boat had come back to the ship with the raft in tow, the French soldiers bearded and strange, he could dimly discern that the broad beaches of Belgium were still marked as if by sinuous processions of dark insects—the queues of soldiers of the Allied Armies dumbly waiting, and only faintly hoping, to be taken off.

Another destroyer came tearing up behind him and then slowed down to let a man on her bridge shout an angry message through a megaphone.

"Ahoy, *Iolanthe*! *Iolanthe*, ahoy!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" returned Calum Bell, making himself heard between cupped hands.

"Get to hell out of this and make for Dover," bawled the megaphone. "It's nearly sun-up. Those bloody bombers will be over any minute now."

"I could still take another hundred men. Look at the beaches!" Calum bawled back.

"Take your orders, you bloody fool, and get to hell——"

The rest was overwhelmed by a harsh, barking, banging, spitting clamour from the destroyer's ack-ack guns. The light, swift shells sang viciously over the *Iolanthe*; their explosions dotted the lightening eastern sky. The yacht shook as her own guns started to fire. But the drone of the things unseen behind the early morning clouds was relentless.

The first stick out of the skies sprang the plates along the vessel's starboard side and had Calum Bell despatching one of his watch-keepers to inspect and report. The second ripped along a string of ships' boats that a white pleasure-launch from Teddington was painfully towing through one of the emptying channels. Two of the third took the *Iolanthe* on the port bow and the starboard quarter, blowing the bridge-deck and its occupants to smithereens.

3

The flat, puffy voice of Ambrose filled the pleasant little room the Oliphants had made out of the top floor of the surviving tower of Inverquey House.

"I must say, Rupert," it insisted, "that it shows a dashed fine spirit and all that, but it's simply my duty to point out to you that you are no chicken now. That rules you out so far as the Services are concerned; and as for war work, well, without saying too much about our position, I really do think that your place is here. I mean that."

Ambrose lit a spill at the fire that burned in the grate, though the July afternoon was warm, and puffed at his pipe.

"I mean to say—*puff, puff*—it's not as if we were—*puff, puff, puff*—out of it by any means. Not by a very long chalk. Dammit! Didn't we give up Agincourt to the naval chaps? What about the old *Iolanthe*, saving hundreds of troops at Dunkirk and then getting blown up, if you please? And when you think of Rose Anne's adventure, escaping from France and getting her picture in the papers, and Bluebell working like a horse in those canteens and things, and young Roderick Bell getting torpedoed and bringing his lifeboat in from dam' nearly mid-Atlantic . . . It would be a different bag of tricks if you and I were young chaps, Rupert, but I'll jolly well argue with anybody that we're as dam' close to the war as anybody; not to mention that ack-ack battery bang on the hill behind us and what we've been able to put into War Loan."

Rupert did not offer any comment on these arguments.

"There's another thing," Ambrose went on conclusively. "I've said nothing about this, but the fact is that I know the Lord-Lieutenant expects me to lend a hand with this L.D.V. business in a pretty big way; a commission and all that. Well, that's going to mean running about the country at all hours of day and night, and I'll jolly well have to have somebody to keep the house open for me, won't I?"

"I suppose so, Ambrose," said Rupert meekly.

He had failed, as he had fully expected to fail. Rupert had listened one evening to the Prime Minister speaking on the wireless and had been afflicted by a faint but sufficiently genuine stirring of his social conscience. It had not died within him, but as he hesitated to speak and waited day after day like a nervous boy for the opportunity of discovering Ambrose in a good mood, he had come to know that he had seized on the emergency to provide him with a belated way of escape from himself and from the prison he had suffered to be built about him.

From the western window of the tower-room Rupert looked down on the gardens that had once been the pride and care of Iron Jock. Now they were a wilderness. The summer grass had been suffered to grow so high that it was almost up to the shoulders of those of the chipped and yellowing stucco statues that had not fallen or been knocked over. Bushes sprawled like untidy animals over what had once been a rolled croquet lawn. An iron seat, one rest broken away, rusted in a thicket of knapweed. Rushes and orchis had come with water from the high ground behind to flourish beside roses that had reverted to briars. The most eloquent sign in Rupert's eyes of neglect and encroaching poverty was the narrow, sinuous path of beaten earth that ran from the outer gates to the tower over the moss on what he could remember to have been a broad and proudly gravelled carriage drive.

He crossed the room and stared through the south window that so brilliantly commanded views of three separate arms of the mountain-guarded estuary and felt himself like a political prisoner, comfortably circumstanced in all the physical ways but powerfully denied the essentials of freedom.

At the same time, Rupert perfectly understood himself and his brother and their joint position, and he saw the falseness of the analogy. Ambrose was no gaoler by conviction, only a frightened man who half-deceived himself with windy phrases, secretly haunted by the thought that he might one day have to live alone. And he, Rupert Ivie Oliphant, was inveterately timid and lazy beyond the power of his smouldering conscience to hold to a purpose; and he was also a frightened man, desperately apprehensive of the emptiness of the years ahead.

4

Within the heavy black-out curtains the lounge of Number Four, Dunedin Terrace, was warm and very quiet. Rose Anne was reading. Bell's white hands and fingers writhed and pointed over the needles with which she was knitting a sea-boot stocking. There seemed to be no traffic at all along the road outside. The knitting needles clicked faintly, a page of the book rasped lightly as it was turned, and now and again a bit of ash whispered as it fell to the hearth; and the small sounds only emphasized the domestic content that pervaded the room.

Rose Anne was not, however, so wholly absorbed in her book as she appeared to be. The delicate antennae of her apprehensions had been warning her ever since the evening meal was over that her

sister's mind was taut with a preoccupation. Bell, dear soul, could look so practical and uncomplicated and possessed.

Rose Anne smiled to herself to think how her sister, now a brisk little woman of middle-age, given to wearing short tweed skirts, flat-heeled shoes and shapeless hats, had half-deliberately encouraged thus the legend that had made her, the gossip-writing boys of the evening papers happily assisting, one of the city's characters : pointed out in the streets, photographed, paragraphed, interviewed and even caricatured as the city's one and only Bluebell.

But with her profound, instinctive sympathy with this other daughter of her own father Rose Anne knew that in this special hour Bell was somehow troubled. Over the edge of her book now and again she saw the busy hands go still, as if the knitting woman must stop to think or listen.

On her own part Bell was as acutely conscious of the imminent significance of Rose Anne. Glancing from under her eyebrows she took in with a sad pleasure the familiar but always alluring picture of the fragile woman with the thin face, the faintly ruddy hair now greying beautifully, and the light, remote eyes that concealed an inner mystery. This woman had known infinitely more of passion and fulfilment and grief than she, Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant, had ever known or could know now, and yet she remained inveterately the dependent, the creature to be cherished. It was terror to think of Rose Anne alone, as now she had to think.

All her instincts rejected the superstitious, but this thought was in her mind and would not leave it ; and she listened as a dog does for familiar footsteps. Because a detective inspector, visiting the office about the shabby defalcation of one of her cash-girls, had importantly hinted at emergency impending. Absurd ! But one December night in London, having attended a Whitehall conference and given a Cabinet Minister some home truths about the art and science of catering, Bell had been hurled by blast against a railing and had spent hours of humiliating discomfort in a public lavatory underground ; and now she was burdened by too much knowledge and too much care.

" Time for the news," she suddenly said, breaking the long silence.

" It must be," Rose Anne agreed.

Bell leaned forward and turned the switch of the wireless set on a table by the fireplace. On a rising hum from the instrument they heard the tag-end of the announcer's familiar and irrelevant ". . . within approximately half-a-minute." Soon the chimes of Big Ben in distant, embattled London were ringing through the room, and on the first stroke of the great hammer Bell carefully reset the watch on her wrist.

Then, suddenly, the room was filled with the howling of sirens, and she leapt to her feet.

"That's it this time," she said.

Rose Anne laughed, and Bell stared at her.

"Silly! That's the warning in London coming over the wireless."

"Oh! I thought . . . Yes, how silly!"

And in that moment of a swift relief from suspense their nerves were jerked tight again by the near, arrogant, relentless howl of the siren on the roof of the superintendent's cottage in the Gardens over the way. Behind its imminent roaring they could hear the dreadful cry being taken up all over the city, a pack of wolves baying the alarm above the roofs and along the streets.

"That *is* it!" snapped Bell. "Now I've got to get down to the garage and see that those canteens are ready to move if they're wanted. You never know."

"I suppose not," said Rose Anne indolently. "But there have been so many false alarms."

"You never know."

Bell had laid out in her room all the things she had long envisaged she might need if the mysterious hour should ever strike—a white overall, high fleece-lined boots of soft leather, a little silver flask that had been one of Ambrose's surprising birthday gifts, a scarf, a beret, and a heavy coat with a bottle of aspirin tablets in a pocket and the authoritative brassard on the left sleeve. She looked into the lounge on her way to the door.

"I'm going now, dear."

"Look after yourself."

"It may be just another false alarm, but don't wait up for me. And if it does happen to get bad, Rosie, do go down to the doctor's and get into the cellar."

"Don't worry about me. Look after yourself."

"Perhaps I won't be long."

"Good luck!"

"Cheerio!"

The real partings were apt to be like that, thought Bell as she drove her little car into the city, halted every now and again by steel-helmeted policemen angrily telling her that this was no mere Purple but a real Red. When she heard the first thuds of gunfire away to the east and then the drone of alien motors high up in the calm sky of a March night, the great arch beneficently lighted by a full moon, she reflected how strange it was that, almost deliberately rejecting emotion, she and Rose Anne had not kissed as they would have done on any uneventful, domestic evening. Then the first of the bombs

crashed in the distance as she passed through the Square, and her mind turned to the night's work.

Under the heavily-shaded lights of the big garage the six vehicles she had equipped in careful anticipation of this very night were neatly ranged on the expanse of concrete, their engines already turning. A group of girls and middle-aged men, heavily wrapped, stood by, the voices of the former high and shrill in the brittle tension of their first approach to the reality of danger.

The lean figure of her foreman stepped out of the group to greet Bell.

"That's pretty well everything, Miss Bell," he reported. "Two of the girls are no' here yet, but they'll turn up before we've finished loading. Charlie Begg's away to the stores in the big lorry to bring down the fresh stuff."

"Good, Willie!" Bell approved. "Any word from the War Room?"

"Aye, the transport chap was on the 'phone a minute past. It's all down at the Ferry; they'll be going for the big battleship in the basin. I doubt it's bad. They've hit the big furniture works on the top of the hill yonder, and they say it's blazing. That's a beacon for the swine already—and there they go again, the dirty brutes!"

Another flight of the enemy machines passed, high and mysterious even in their precise mission, over the centre of the city. The little group of men and women who stood helpless in the draughty spaces of the garage fell silent, each of them wondering emptily why the guns did not speak.

"Yes, I suppose this is the real thing," said Bell, adding briskly: "Well, we've waited long enough. I think, Willie, once we've got the convoy away, you'd better try to find a volunteer to follow us up with another load on the big lorry—loaves, tea, sugar; they've got my list. Tell the man to look for me at the Report Centre. I think it's in that old picture house at the Cross."

"There'll be no need to look for volunteers," grumbled the foreman. His sharp, artisan eyes above knobbly cheek-bones engaged hers sharply. "But you're no' going down there, Miss Bell, surely?"

Bell snapped at him and said: "Certainly I am!"

She jerked a gloved hand towards the waiting covey of girl volunteers under the shadows.

"Do you think I can send these children into God knows what and stand here, twiddling my fingers?" she asked angrily. "Don't be a damned fool, Willie! And by the way, there are three crates of toilet paper in the stores. They're in the corner to the left of the big sliding doors. See that these come down with the lorry."

"That's an idea," said Willie.

He was an old soldier of 1914-18, and he appreciated exactly the wise bearing of this instruction. My, she was a right warrior, was Miss Bell! She could think of everything when many a man would be running round in circles.

Then Charlie Begg came back with the big lorry, and for twenty minutes they were all busy. Bell moved swiftly from truck to truck, counting, checking, her mind and eye relentless. Tea and water; oil and matches; milk and sugar—there must be plenty of sugar; bread, margarine, jam; meat extract, salt, pepper; the hurricane lamps in reserve; towels, dish-clothes, soap, washing-powder . . . But she had planned it all months before and rehearsed the loading again and again, and now it was foolish to imagine that a detail could either have been forgotten or be supplied now. As well ask the foreman if he had made sure the trucks were topped with petrol, oil and water.

"That'll do, Willie," she said at length. She raised her voice.

"Listen everybody, please. We are starting off now. Mr. Crockett and I will lead in Number One. Other drivers follow us in order to the Report Centre in the cinema at Ferry Cross. We'll probably be separated there, and I hope—I know"—she had to master a little catch in her throat—"you'll all do your best. Good luck!"

"Good luck, Miss Oliphant!" the thin voices of the girls answered her enthusiastically above the reticent rumble of the men.

Charlie the foreman gripped her hand.

"I'd best take that lorry down myself," he said; and the dark eyes in the thin artisan's face took Bell's intently as he added: "See you and look after yourself."

The convoy swung gracefully out of the shadowy garage into the bland moonlight that silvered the walls and lighted the streets of the city.

These were nearly empty, and it seemed strange to Bell that it should be quiet here in the crowded richness of the business district ignored by the bombers that still passed with maddening regularity overhead towards their blazing target in the little shipbuilding town eight miles away down the River.

The string of vehicles, smoothly waved on by the doubled pointsmen at the crossings, passed an occasional tramcar that oddly symbolized the maintenance of public order. They were cheered by one queue of people who, caught in cinema or theatre by the alarm, waited patiently for improbable 'buses to take them home to distant suburbs. But the city had no reality in Bell's mind as the cars moved westwards at a steady thirty. She had already projected herself into the wild world that, over the crest of the city's outermost rise, filled the sky with the smoke and flame of its burning.

When they topped the rise and had the battlefield before them Bell found herself unable to map the scene as her orderly mind desired. She could identify the furniture factory that blazed like a torch on the hillside above the River, but the flat ribbon of land by the docks and shipyards was only a smouldering confusion, a wilderness given over to livid flashes and equally alarming and sudden blacknesses, an abandoned patch of civilization, so rocked and stunned by the occasional earthquake of high explosive that the popping and banging and coloured rattling of shellfire overhead seemed but a trivial embroidery on chaos.

At the same time, she wondered at the spasmodic nature of air warfare. It had nothing of the sustained quality she had imagined. There were long gaps and silences, during which you were tempted to think that the ordeal was over. Then you would hear again the *vroom-vroom-vroom* of the German engines, and feel rather than hear the seismic thuds of the exploding bombs; and the stenches of burning, borne on the light westerly wind, tingled at the nostrils even through the oily vapours from the car's engine.

"It looks like hot work to-night," Bell ventured to say to her driver.

"It'll be no joke," returned John Crockett in the grim, inverted Scots idiom.

She glanced sideways at her driver's face, all its angles clear in the light from the fires. It was strong and plain; it even had the beauty of strength in its plainness. John Crockett, under no sort of authoritarian compulsion, had elected to drive into hell with her.

He was what, in their subtly graded industrial society, they called a solid man in a fair way of business: a metal merchant. He was prosperous enough to have given the Red Cross an ambulance in memory of his only boy, dead at St. Valery-en-Caux almost a year past. But then and therefore (as only Bell and a few others knew) his wife had pillowed her head in the gas oven one night; and here, driving as steadily as he used to drive the bright-headed boy and his mother in the black Austin Twelve to St. Andrews for the summer holidays, he was taking the mobile canteen on its V-20 chassis into action: serene in his act of expiation through sacrifice.

Bell thought of the woman who sat alone among the jigging crockery in the compartment behind them: Emily Tompkinson, of all queer names: a remote and sallow Englishwoman who had come out of the blue to look for a job at Bluebell's when her Scots husband, first officer in a tanker, had gone with his ship 100 miles West-Sou'-West of the Scillies. She was reticent, as if her hurt had been too sore to speak about, but she was a worker in her remote way and the

first of the volunteers for the canteens—again as if the act of dedication were a spiritual necessity.

That was a queer thought: that all of the crew of Number One had come to nearly final terms with life. Old folk, spent folk, bereaved folk could afford to throw away the remaining years, all the more gladly for the splendour of the occasion. Thinking of the young girls in the vans behind them, however, Bell's heart was heavy. They had come forward so gaily and without thinking. The little flash of uniform, the small illusion of consequence, had pleased them. But so innocent, so young; so full of passion and fertility! Young girls with pretty faces and slim legs and round breasts, alert for laughter and mating; so many virgins going into battle while their sweethearts and brothers still languished of boredom in the training camps!

The convoy swept down from the upper highway to the main tram route by the riverside. They had already passed through the fringe of the arc of destruction, where an occasional clot of flame and dust marked the failure of a nervous bomb-aimer in the obliteration of a council house; and now they encountered traffic coming against them—ambulances, police cars, and again ambulances. They passed into a belt of smoke where lines of hose serpentined across the road, and John Crockett had to slow and ease his vehicle over the little wooden bridges that straddled them.

They passed a church, its roof splitting and throwing off splinters of slate in the fierce heat of the internal blaze that filled a Gothic window with more mad splendour than the evening sun through cheap coloured glass had ever cast upon a humdrum congregation. They saw bands of refugees, dim bunches of nondescripts, led in shabby processions to the Rest Centres, and it struck Bell as curious, when they had to slow down abreast one of these sad columns, that there was no blubbering or shouting or cursing or screaming among these outraged people, and that they marched silently, obediently, behind those who were able and fit to help them.

The truck shook and swerved as a roar, a flash and a billow of blast, followed by the noise of a cataract of tumbling masonry, assaulted it from about a hundred yards to the right.

"These chaps must be trying to get me," said John Crockett with the wry humour of the North.

"I can only see that we've got our work cut out to-night," replied Bell.

"There's that," agreed John Crockett reasonably.

They came at length to the Report Centre by a shabby route through side-streets. A waving red lamp halted the convoy on the main road; beyond it they could see for themselves that it was littered by a fall of red sandstone blocks: the whole front of a tenement

building lying absurdly across the thoroughfare and, dark little figures in the downcast light of ambulance head-lamps, the searchers swarming over the ruin.

A police sergeant of the War Reserve thrust a strained face through the window by which Bell was sitting.

"You can't get through here, you can't get through here!" he panted. "There's a tenement down, and God knows how many folk under it! I don't know how you're to get to the Centre. The whole place is a shambles, a fair shambles! Well, you can try, but don't blame me if you can't get through. It's just a shambles . . . O Jesus!" he wailed on a crisis of breaking nerves as a stick of bombs crashed somewhere among the bungalows on the hillside above them. "That's them again. It hasn't stopped all night."

John Crockett carefully backed the truck to make his turn into the side-street.

"I wonder how that chap ever got his stripes," he said. "It's a bad job if the police are going to lose their heads."

"It may be shock, of course," Bell suggested.

"There's that."

The convoy had to halt in a dark street short of the Cross, and Bell got down alone to hurry across the open space where the two main roads met. After the false security of the truck she felt foolishly defenceless in the open, and a bulky policeman, halting her on her run towards the old picture house, made her feel more than ever an interloper with his solid: "Here, ma lassie! Where d'ye think you're going?"

It was strange again that, within the frail portico of the cinema, where a blaze of hard lights had once attracted custom, only the feeble neutral gleam of a low-powered blue bulb faintly illuminated the strained, corpse-like faces of people who, stricken by sudden calamity and lost in this lunatic new world, waited in queues to be advised, comforted, guided by the vestigial representatives of that Authority which seemed to be in the act of collapsing about them with the walls of their homes.

The Controller, when Bell had fought and bullied her way to his desk, sat with a telephone receiver in each hand and at each ear, carrying on two conversations with fluency and a sort of desperate calm. He was an elderly, solid, bald man of John Crockett's kind, as Bell reflected while she waited. The battles were not all to the lean, tanned, crisp and moustacheoed. She could have laughed at the Controller's equable flow of counsel to his enquiries.

"Well, we'll get some pumps across the Lower Ferry from Fergusliè. Aye . . . they had a stray PBX near the goods yard, but the motors are cooling off nicely now. Leave it to us . . . O, it's

Foster's now! This is getting good. I'm beginning to enjoy this. No, man! I can't let you have the Pioneers. Can you not get it into your nut that five miles by two of the riverside are blazing? You won't be forgotten; don't worry . . . Yes, yes, Mr. Maclaren! I'm not forgetting your oil-tanks. The Navy's got a party away down now in trucks. They'll be with you in a jiffy."

The Controller winked jocularly at Bell over his receivers.

"Yes, yes!" he assured one of his distant and agonized correspondents. "It's bad. But we'll see you through. The system's working. That's the point: it's *working*. Now, you just carry on like a good chap."

He slammed both receivers back on their rests and beamed on Bell.

"O, it's you, Miss Oliphant? A sight for sore eyes . . . Six mobile canteens? That's good. I could be doing with six dozen . . . Jimmy!" he shouted.

A pale, strained, clerkly-looking young man darted across to the desk.

"Jimmy, go you across the road with Miss Oliphant and give these six mobile canteens a job each. You'll want one up at the furniture place for certain. There's that mess down at Inch's boiler-shop. You could put one by the Catholic School in Murray Place. . . . Anyhow, send them where they're wanted and don't waste time."

The telephone bells jangled on his desk, and the Controller snatched up the receivers and arranged them round his face, so that he looked absurdly like a horse in harness. He winked at Bell again and spoke across the twin mouth-pieces.

"Good for you, Miss Oliphant, and thanks! We could be doing with more like you . . . Yes, yes! Keep your hair on. The pumps will be with you in the next ten minutes. They can't be everywhere, man. What's that? Baxter and Bell's this time? This is getting good. I'm beginning to enjoy myself now . . . The time! Seven minutes off midnight, and this is only the half of it."

Mobile canteen Number One—she had deeply offended Willie the foreman by refusing to have the little fleet christened fancifully or commercially labelled—sped up the hill towards the pyre of the furniture factory. Number Two was away to, where was it?—to that wrecked and bloody boiler-shop in the shipyard down the River. Number Three was . . . but it did no good to count the tale. Each canteen and its crew were usefully employed; and that was as it should be. As the truck sped up the steep and winding but broad road that led to the region of bungalows behind the shipyards Bell thought of such as the Controller and John Crockett and Emily Tompkinson and of the young, soft girls who, with a solid man at

the wheel of each vehicle, were in that moment being driven into danger, their foolish hearts beating.

It was glory to be part and parcel of an organisation that functioned. Courage was not necessarily romantic. Courage was essentially the will to face the emergency : at the lowest, the urge of the basic human decency to make the best of a bad job. That excited police sergeant of the War Reserve down on the main road was only unfortunate, not culpable. Men like Ambrose were sports of the economic process, weeds in a garden that was still rich for all this silly banging and clattering overhead and about.

You knew a good deal about life and yourself when death was at hand. The doing of the necessary deed was the ultimate happiness. It was the most exquisite sort of pleasure to watch how John Crockett, when a near-miss shook the vehicle and he must recover his command, changed gear with a smooth double de-clutch : the proper and humble man meeting the appointed moment.

There was reason for faith in mankind . . . But at this juncture in her excited thinking a policeman signalled John Crockett to stop as, in the fierce light from the blazing factory, he was about to swing the canteen into the outer courtyard.

" That'll do ye," said the policeman. " Where d'ye think ye're going ? "

" The Controller sent us here," Bell snapped back at him. " This is a mobile canteen. The firemen have got to be fed, haven't they ? "

" Ye'll stay where ye are," returned the policeman massively. " If it's tea ye're servin', there's plenty of suvvulians wantin' it."

A mutter from John Crockett checked the biting retort on the tip of Bell's tongue.

" Just park here and open up for the time being," said John Crockett. " We'll get a chance to get in later on."

It was much to be at work, to drop the tail-board and free Emily Tompkinson from her strange claustration, to get the urns boiling and the mugs filled. It chanced that the wardens were evacuating the survivors of a shattered block of workers' dwellings nearby, and soon the women were absorbed in the service of a queue of refugees which, patiently marshalled by John Crockett, passed slowly and processionally, figures in a fantastic tapestry, across the frame of subdued light from inside the vehicle.

They were mainly youngish married women and their children : stricken and silent, their faces livid and their eyes dark even when a fresh burst of flame from within the burning factory surprised them. They were simple people who had been grossly humbled ; their silence and patience seemed the most exquisite expression of gratitude, and, even as she worked swiftly to serve them, Bell thought that the

gesture of their arms and hands, uplifted to receive the mug of tea, would remain with her for ever as the lovely symbol of one horrible night's work.

Suddenly a roar and a crash and a fierce buffet of blast broke the rhythm of their labours. The vehicle rocked and then righted itself, but with a ruinous smashing of crockery and a flood of scalding tea. The faces in the dim-lighted frame quite mysteriously vanished.

" Christ ! They've hit the factory again," they heard the high cry of one frightened warden.

Then a steadier and sterner voice commanded the confusion without.

" Fall in there, the lot of you ! " it demanded sonorously. " It's only three minutes' walk to the Rest Centre. Keep quiet and follow me. They can't hit the same place twice, can they ? "

Another of those fine and steady men who assert themselves only in crisis, thought Bell with emotion. Her senses told her that the stricken people had obeyed the strong voice and were following their leader down the hill.

The canteen stood abandoned in the waste land. She became aware of a stinging where a wash of boiling water had swept over her right foot. The face of John Crockett appeared in the frame.

" All right in there ? That was a pretty near thing."

" A bit messy, but quite all right," Bell replied calmly, for Emily Tompkinson was already bent industriously over the broken crockery on the floor.

" Well, we could go in now and give the firemen a turn," suggested John Crockett. " Just stay where you are, and I'll take her in gently. That big stick of a Bobby's away now."

It was but a few score yards through the factory gates and across the asphalte to where the pumps were still working under the blazing building, a calcined skeleton now, with fire in the eye-sockets of its windows. On Bell was the feeling of those who go into the culminating attack. She glanced at Emily Tompkinson and saw the face of this remote Englishwoman as that of one who has made her peace with life in calm and resignation but has still the firm will to help all who suffer under the blind strokes of circumstance.

She was startled to discern a uniformed figure running up behind the van. It jumped on the step in the tail-board. A blackened face under a black steel helmet grimaced at her.

" Where the bloody hell do you think you're going ? " yelled this officer of the N.F.S., crude in his extremity. " That wall 'll be down on us any minute now. My crews are all packing up. You've no bloody business——"

The wall fell then, the whole front of the factory bulging out like a bursting blossom and coming down with a roar so loud and decisive that even the officials in the old picture house thought it was only another bomb dropping up the hill.

Rose Anne waited at home. At first she thought in her vague way that Bell might be back by midnight, and that she would put on the kettle for a cup of tea when she heard the familiar patter of Bell's firm feet on the stairs. She went on reading, for she was a middle-aged woman who had painfully learned the importance of calm. As she read, however, the clamour of thuds and bangs in the near-distance was intrusive on even her remote mind, and a small itch of fear started to work like a grub in her consciousness.

This was one of those problems of behaviour Rose Anne loathed. They made life so thorny, edgey, unpleasant. Bell had always managed everything for her. Somebody was always turning up. It had been left to Rex Narracott to get her out of France in the crisis ; and Rex was dead now, dead off Dunkirk in the small motor-boat in which he had contrived to recross the Channel to lend a hand. And what if there was to be nobody now to help her ?

She tried to thrust the thought from her mind as a confession of treacherous egotism. It was important to do something, and Rose Anne decided to go to bed. This was what Bell would have counselled, and perhaps she was only an obedient fool when it came to action. As she undressed she hesitated for a moment, thinking wistfully of the company in the basement of the doctor's flat below, but she realized that she had no physical fear at all of either bombs or errant gunfire, and that to be alone had become a spiritual necessity.

She went to sleep quickly enough, as a child sleeps, but the roar and rock of a stray bomb falling not far away wakened her. The bedside clock in the gleam of her torch told her it was three o'clock in the morning. She could hear that the enemy planes were still coming in and going out again with German regularity, the beat of their desynchronized motors coming in waves as lethally monotonous as the tick of a grandfather clock.

For six hours now they had been coming and going. Bell must be desperately tired. Rose Anne grew agitated, imagining the terrors of fire and explosion in which Bell must be working. She tried to think that Bell might have waited behind to supervise the movement of her canteens from her office. There was no comfort in that illusion. It was the imperative need of Bell's character to be in the battle and to tackle the world's unreason at close quarters. Bell would be somewhere down there among the flames and explosions.

Rose Anne lay awake for a long time, restless, frightened, unhappy

and ashamed of her own lethargy. At length, however, her senses told her that the mysterious traffic of the bombers overhead was thinning out. There dawned on her mind a clear impression as of a straggling of the attack, and when one formation went over, flying low and with a great noise but only desultorily pursued by gunfire, it seemed to have the alarmed haste of a flight of rooks beating towards their nests through gathering twilight. She pictured the German youths, with their cropped heads, cramped and anxious in their cabins, staring ahead towards their landing grounds in Norway, France and the Low Countries.

The sirens raised their awful voices and steadied on the All Clear. Rose Anne swung out of bed and, in slippers and dressing-gown, walked through to the lounge. She drew aside one wing of the heavy curtains and saw that the dawn was beginning to break behind the trees in the Gardens.

Bell should be home soon now. She would put on the kettle. But she dropped instead into a corner of the chesterfield to wait a little. She would wait for the familiar pattern of sound that represented Bell's impatient negotiation of the corner out of the main road ; her characteristic slamming of gears, the grunt of brakes decisively applied, and the bang of the car's door.

She was alert when a spasmodic flow of passing vehicles heralded the new day and the partial return of sanity to the world. She heard the silly, brittle laughter of young women who had had a good time in the shelters and cellars and were now going home in male company. But Bell was late. Bell must be worn out, infinitely wearier than herself, whose eyes were hot and heavy.

Rose Anne wakened again out of a doze, shivering. So foolish and selfish to have slept ! It was light now ; the soft glow of the March morning, a mild sun shining through haze and gathered smoke, came kindly through the half-curtained window. She was startled to see from her wrist-watch that it was nearly eight o'clock ; and still Bell had not come home. She was alone in the empty house that had lived only on Bell's energy.

Was this it ? This the end and the moment of finality ? It was necessary to be calm, however wildly the thoughts and fears would race across the hinterland of the mind.

Rose Anne's eye lighted on the sea-boot stocking Bell had dropped when the sirens sounded an age ago. She picked it up as if she might perchance feel the lingering warmth of beloved hands in the crossed needles. A foolish thought. The ravell'd sleave of care . . .

But that was only another foolish thought. Nothing of Bell's could be ravelled. She was the last orderly expression of the folk they called the Oliphants of Garvel : the people who had once built

beautiful ships and had latterly made and inherited and spent and wasted money. For all his intolerance Fergus Shaw had spoken the bitter truth. Only the rubbish was left now: her foolish self and Ambrose and Rupert. Chris had never quite belonged to the Oliphants, and her happiness was pleasant but unimportant. If it was really true that Bell was not coming home . . .

As, bracing herself, she moved towards the telephone the bell on the instrument jangled crudely.

"Central Police speaking," said a distant, official voice. "Sorry to worry you, but it's about a woman called Bluebell Gillanders Oliphant by her papers . . ."

THE END

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